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**SOULS IN A STATE OF EMERGENCE-Y: WORK IN PROGRESS**

**Project Thesis**

**by**

**LOIS KOESTER HAPPE**

**B.A., M.Div.**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements**

**for the degree of**

**Doctor of Ministry**

**EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL**

**April, 1993**

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## TRANSCENDENTAL ETUDE (excerpt)

*But there are times--perhaps this is one of them--  
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;  
when we have to pull back from the incantations,  
rhythms we've moved to thoughtlessly,  
and disenthral ourselves, bestow  
ourselves to silence, or a severer listening, cleansed  
of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static  
crowding the wires. We cut the wires,  
finding ourselves in a free-fall, as if  
our true home were the undimensional  
solitudes, the rift  
in the Great Nebula.*

*No one who survives to speak  
new language, has avoided this:  
the cutting-away of an old force that held her  
rooted to an old ground  
the pitch of utter loneliness  
where she herself and all creation  
seem equally dispersed, weightless, her being a cry  
to which no echo comes or can ever come.*

*Vision begins to happen in such a life  
as if a woman quietly walked away  
from an argument and jargon in a room  
and sitting down in the kitchen, began turning in her lap  
bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps,  
laying them out absently on the scrubbed boards  
in the lamplight, with small rainbow-colored shells  
sent in cotton-wool from somewhere far away,  
and skeins of milkweed from the nearest meadow--  
original domestic silk, the finest findings--  
and the darkblue petal of the petunia  
and the dry darkbrown lace of seaweed;  
not forgotten either, the shed silver  
whisker of the cat,  
the spiral of paper-wasp-nest curling  
beside the finch's yellow feather.  
Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity,  
the striving for greatness, brilliance--  
only with the musing of a mind  
one with her body, experienced fingers quietly pushing  
dark against bright, silk against roughness,  
pulling the tenets of life together  
with no mere will to mastery,  
only care for the many-lived, unending  
forms in which she finds herself.*

Adrienne Rich





## **PROLOGUE: FINDING MY VOICE**

It required a full eight years to reach a conclusion.

From the first Sunday of Advent in 1984 to the conclusion of the church year in 1992, I experienced, as an observer and as a participant, a profound personal transformation. I have watched and I have felt the emergence of something new, an aspect of myself that is only now beginning to feel familiar. At times the transformation has seemed inevitable, a process driven by an unknown spirit, whose character encompassed the diabolical as well as the sublime. But, while I have often felt carried along by events, it would be a mistake to assume I was the passive object of external forces. Throughout the process, I have been acutely aware of the choices before me. As I was changed and as I changed, I knew I had options -- I could choose to proceed with the exploration of what was developing, I could choose to resist the process and what I was learning, or I could choose to retreat into denial of what I had discovered about myself. For three years, I danced with what was emerging and taking shape within me -- when I felt brave, it was easy to take the next step; when I felt confused, I hesitated; when I was afraid, I withdrew. Finally, as the tempo increased, emergence culminated in a crisis of emergency and a decision that brought my dance of choosing to its finale.

The signal that marks the beginning of this episode of transformation (acknowledging that the division of a life's story into segments is somewhat arbitrary)



was the emergence of a poem that expressed in powerful images how I was feeling about myself and my situation. It is, by far, the best poem I have written. It surprised me with its richness of image and metaphor. For much of my life, my style in writing, and in living, has been characterized by utility. I have rarely expressed myself. Rather, I made statements, declaring conclusions I made about matters outside myself. Prose, flat-footed and focused, was the mode I preferred for communication. I depended on embodied activity to reveal to others who I was and what was important to me. My voice was an instrument that had a limited repertoire. So the poem emerged rather unexpectedly and abruptly out of a background undistinguished by color or form or movement.

The era that the poem inaugurated came to a conclusion just before Advent in 1992 as I was struggling to give shape to this project, a little more than five years after the decision that gave definition to the emergence-y. The completion of this project, a project intended to explore the meaning of the transformative process I had experienced, evaded me. I knew intuitively the project's shape and form would tell me, with more clarity than I had managed up to that point, what the prior eight years had been about. If I could "see" how to give form to the many pieces of information before me, I would not only break through my blocked thought process, I would also be able to break free of my preoccupation with making sense of an important change in my life.

Like the emergence of the poem, the images that seeped into my consciousness then were a gift from a source that I neither control nor direct. I have





no authority to command its service. The images (illustrated in Appendix B) suggested relationships that eluded me as I struggled to fit the pieces together. Throughout the era of my emergence-y, the intervention of my imagination at critical times has been a notable feature of the transformative process. That my imagination assisted in bringing this important era to conclusion should not have surprised me.

For years, I struggled to find my voice in the project I had proposed as the conclusion to my D. Min. program. For some time I believed the disclosure of my story as one resource among the stories of other women was all that was required. I tried in vain to find a way to speak of my experience objectively, to talk about my experience, in order to present it as data along with the accounts of other women who experienced a similar crisis. I did not know how to speak through my experience.

I struggled mightily. There were a variety of demons I wrestled with, some of whom I did not recognize until the struggle was over. The voice that I had relied on for so long was powerful--the mode of discourse, especially in academic settings, should be objective, analytical, disembodied (meaning non-particular). That voice did battle with the lesser demons, the one who objected to using personal material at all, the one who loved reading and research but hated expressing an opinion, and the one who argued for including an answer to every possible objection to any declarative statement. After the opening arguments subsided, the real issue became apparent. The new "I" wanted to speak, wanted to tell what "she" knew, what "she" has discovered in this new landscape. "She" had been growing, supported by the new



community I have been part of for five years. "She" knew that in order to sustain her place in the community of voices that are me,"she" had to be heard through the completed project. Until then, I did not fully understand how central the emergence of that new voice was to my entire experience at Episcopal Divinity School (EDS).

It was an encounter with a quotation that I stumbled upon in the course of my desperate search for a way to enter the writing process that confirmed and clarified my internal struggle. In Invisible Guests, E.S. Casey observed, "The shift from objective to experiential reality entails a shift in the nature of representations from being indicative to being expressive."<sup>1</sup> In that encounter I recognized two things. First, the heart and soul of my own experience of transformation (emergence-y) of the preceding eight years was allowing felt experience priority over considered experience in my life. For decades, I had mediated experience through any number of filters, overriding and ignoring the immediate aspect of experience, the feelings and intuitions associated with events. I had accepted the filters as reliable because they seemed to explain the world and made communication possible with other human beings. Although I often felt tension, even pain, when experience didn't "fit," it took a long time and lots of encouragement for me to be able to accept personal information as valid.

Secondly, I realized that I couldn't prepare a written document in the indicative mode without betraying what I know the last several years have been about. In order to honor that experience and the new information I have about

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Watkins, Invisible Guests (Boston: Sigo Press, 1986), p. 72.





myself, I had to abandon a mode that was familiar to me, but one that was inappropriate for this project.<sup>2</sup>

I have been reluctant to adopt a new mode of expression, even when that choice is confirmed by logic and intuition. Although my experience of the last eight years included disengagement from an authority that was declared to be so to an authority that I know to be so, I still find it easy to speak with the voice associated with the earlier authority. It is a voice that is well-rehearsed and comfortable. I know from experience that it is accepted, even rewarded. The new voice I am cultivating entails risks--the risk of being ignored, the risk of being rejected, even the risk of being reprimanded. When I am anxious about using the new voice, I stutter and hesitate. I am still becoming accustomed to its source of authority. If I am able to sustain my resolve to use the expressive mode in this thesis, a style that will

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<sup>2</sup>In an interview reported in Common Boundary ("In Her Own Voice" by Anne Simpkinson, Vol. 10, Issue 4, pp. 22-30), Marion Woodman, author and Jungian psychotherapist, described how her writing style has evolved. In her earliest work, she relied on a format that she associates with the academy and with a style that she says reflects a masculine way of organizing material. Over the course of her career, she has been concerned to express the material she wants to convey in a form that is congruent with the content. In addition, as a woman writer, she has worked to find a style that does not erase the unique resources she brings to the task of writing. In her most recent book, she has abandoned charts, references and quotes that were an integral part of her earlier books and adopted a form that she believes represents a feminist style of discourse. In Leaving My Father's House, she collaborates with three other women in telling their own stories. Each of the women narrates her own life history, choosing the events of significance and offering an interpretation of those events. The book emerged from the conversations among the four women about their stories and their reflections on those narratives. The style of the book is empowering for readers; it invites others to consider similar questions of significance at the same time it assumes the ability on the part of readers to do similar intensive reflection.



disclose some of myself as well as the material I want to share, I will know that I have been correct about the dynamic that powered my personal transformation. I will know that my allegiance to "the new creation" will have been confirmed and consolidated. I will know that the emergency has passed and the emergence of soul, through the activity of my imagination; can be expected to continue to enrich and deepen my life. I look forward to that with great anticipation.





the secret known to poets and to nightingales;  
that pain can be managed when it finds perfect expression.

Robert Lowell

## LAMENT FOR LOST DREAMS

*O God, Companion and Lover to many,  
Your Presence has been ever elusive--  
fragile as a snowflake,  
fleeting as a rainbow,  
fascinating as a summer storm.*

*In confidence I searched for you  
in the priest who daily walked beside me.*

*In expectation I reached out for a companion and lover  
of my yearning,  
of my passion,  
of my hope.*

*In confusion I created a God where there was no god  
and there was no eluding his ever presence.*

*In the wasteland of years,  
the path is littered with twisted skeletons of dreams.  
The trail of bitter tears  
is marked by miniatures of life--  
bonsai--  
defined  
confined  
refined  
to exquisite form  
tension and grace.*

*In the wilderness  
Your daemon, keeper of the divining rod,  
visited me.*



*Now your Presence, O God  
wells up from deep reservoirs beneath the desert,  
washing dry bones,  
nursing dormant stumps to flower,  
promising eternal living water.*

*In the reflection of the deep,  
companions and lovers surround me.  
Grasping for assurance troubles the water;  
their presence eludes me.*

*Do not forsake me, nor leave me alone.  
I am thirsty and there is no other fountain.*

*Yet will I trust in the source of the water of life;  
I will drink deeply from the well of your promise.  
In your Presence the desert will bloom  
and dreams shall dance and sing.*

Lois K. Happe  
November 30, 1984





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## CHAPTER I

*Stories give shape to experience, experience  
gives rise to stories.*

Carol Christ  
Diving Deep and Surfacing

## INTRODUCTION

This project is the final part of the Feminist Liberation Theology program that upon its completion confers a Doctor of Ministry degree from Episcopal Divinity School (EDS). It is expected to be the culmination and summary of an individual's program that is envisioned and designed early in one's tenure at the school. Thus, the final product should represent accurately the intentions and accomplishments of a student of Feminist Liberation Theology. At its best, the project should reflect both the process and the substance of the years of enrollment.

When I entered EDS in the fall of 1987, I had just concluded the most tumultuous period of my life. For three years, I had debated the question of whether to leave a marriage that had endured for 23 years. On September 1, I fled, feeling desperation as much as relief that the decision had been made. When the fall semester began several weeks later, I was still anxious, disoriented and vulnerable, but surviving a cataclysm I had feared would destroy me.

Earlier that summer I was only partly aware of the significance of my application to EDS and of the vague hopes I had for my D. Min. program. I was





conscious of my desire to immerse myself in feminist thought--I wanted to "catch up" on all I had missed of the women's movement of the previous two decades. For years I had had an ambivalent relationship to feminism. I had been simultaneously attracted and frightened by both the energy and the ideas associated with the women's movement. I was attracted by its truth. I was frightened by its truth. I was afraid of the conclusions I would have to consider if I accepted feminism as a force in my life. The part of me that had an affinity to feminism (that wasn't always able to be in conversation with other parts of me) took charge of making decisions for me long enough to complete the application for the program and submit it for consideration. I consider my acceptance "providential."

I was aware that I was choosing the FLT program for me. I wanted an academic experience that responded to my questions, my interests, my needs for growth. My decision to apply to the D. Min. program was unlike my earlier decisions to enroll in college or in seminary when utility was a strong motivating factor. Both those experiences were important and were associated with many and varied rewards, but neither was fully satisfying. Many of my concerns were never addressed and, more significantly, I was persuaded to adopt an intellectual agenda that not only ignored, but devalued, issues that were important to me. I wanted no more of it. At 45, I felt it was time to take my commitments and concerns seriously. I believed the program and the place would support me in the task of reintegration that I saw as my most important need. Even though I was confident I had made a good choice, I spent too much time explaining my decision to myself.



My need to feel justified was/is strong.

When my confidence quieted those doubts, I recognized EDS as the most important resource I could have chosen to help me get reoriented after my experience of profound disorientation. The FLT program was not just an opportunity to integrate body, mind and spirit, it was the opportunity I needed. Not only was I searching for a place to give rein to my affinity for feminist thought and practice, I was also looking for a place that would encourage me to consider how this affinity could deepen and strengthen my ministry.

It was a pivotal time in my life. I found a place of sanctuary and hospitality that allowed what was taking shape within me to emerge on its own schedule in its own way. The FLT program nurtured and supported me as I slowly discovered who I was becoming.

Although I had earned appropriate academic credentials for my vocation and had been ordained to ministry in my denomination, I had, up to that point, spent little time on the crucial process of formation. I did not fully recognize it at the beginning, but from the very first, this program has been a time of sustained self-reflection and consciousness-raising. It has been a time of making choices for integrity, for congruity between what I believe and value and what I do.

As I designed my program and project, I was only partly aware of the personal hopes and goals I had. I knew I wanted to understand feminist liberation theology more thoroughly and to integrate those understandings more completely in my life, but I had only a vague idea of how to accomplish that in my project. I





was still paying heed to the internalized voices of the academy which had its standards to uphold. I lacked the clarity I needed to give voice to the new "I" that wanted to speak her truth. I did not realize how important it was for me to continue the process of self-reflection and self-expression only so recently begun. I knew the project would have its roots in autobiography, but then I didn't know the difference between using autobiography as a resource for choosing a focus for research and using autobiography self-consciously as the instrument through which the project takes both content and form. Because I have had an important, transforming experience, I now look at issues differently than I did before. Those changes in perception are part of the report I can make about my experience, but they also influence how I report that experience and the experience of others.

In my proposal, I said I wanted to investigate the spirituality of women at mid-life who had made a significant decision concerning their identity and allegiance, one that had changed the course of their lives. I planned to interview women who had chosen to leave a marriage or to leave a religious order, discussing with them the role spirituality played while they were considering a decision that could change their life's course and commitment. The proposal was strongly related to my story and my experience. I believed the study would be enhanced by my interest and commitment to the questions I wanted to investigate. I believed I could bring an added dimension of understanding to the research since I had first hand knowledge of some of the elements of an important life decision. I also felt that attention to an issue that was critical to women who were similar to me in



experience would reduce the possibility of speaking for or to a group of women that had few ways of knowing if I was authentic; by grounding the project in my own life experience, I believed I was guarding against my tendency to move to abstraction and generalization that presumes to encompass broad categories of individuals in ways that are inappropriate. But, the longer I struggled with the material and tried to organize my thinking, the clearer it became to me the original proposal disguised what I wanted to write.

I was genuinely interested in hearing and analyzing the stories of other women who had found a way through an important decision. I especially wanted to know how their spiritual lives were related to that decision. But I realized it would be impossible to pretend the nub of the issue was located outside of myself. I had to recognize that I would be unable to treat my story as one among ten others. If I proceeded with my proposal, I would have to state clearly that my experience would be the most important dialogue partner in conversations with other women and with other resources that were related to the study. To be accountable, I need to state my intentions as clearly as I am able so as to reduce the effect of hidden agendas on the outcome. With that understanding in mind, I want to acknowledge that this project is, in part, an effort to record and reflect the process of making/discovering the meaning of an important period in my life. I have reached some conclusions that I will discuss in the second half of the paper that are related to my experience as well as the stories of the ten women who were part of the project. I will identify resources that I have found and discuss how they





are related to the issues that have emerged from the data I have gathered from the women I interviewed and from my story. I want to produce an extended reflection paper that expresses something of myself, that in both form and content reveals what I have learned. There can be no more honest or profound way for me to give account for my involvement in the FLT D. Min. program.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the obvious personal benefits, is it a worthy endeavor to examine reflectively the course of my emergence-y as a thesis for the D.Min. degree? I believe so.

First, it can be valuable to others as well as to myself. There is considerable precedent for disclosing personal experience as a way to communicate an important element of reality. There is a significant body of literature containing the reflections of notable spiritual mentors of the ages. In recent times, there has been

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<sup>1</sup>By adopting this beginning point I am consciously engaging (and thereby strengthening) the constructed knower that is emerging for myself. In Women's Ways of Knowing, the authors describe an important aspect of the transition to constructed knowing: "an inner voice and self exist, but may have had a minimum of attention, particularly if the women have learned the lesson of 'weeding out the self,' which our academic institutions so often teach. During the transition into a new way of knowing, there is an impetus to allow the self back into the process of knowing...a thorough-going self-examination at this juncture leads to the construction of a new way of thinking about knowledge, truth and self that guides the person's intellectual and moral life and personal commitments.... During the process of self-examination, women feel a heightened consciousness and sense of choice about 'how I want to think' and 'how I want to be.' They develop a narrative sense of self ...They want to avoid what they perceive to be a shortcoming in many men, the tendency to compartmentalize thought and feeling, home and work, self and other. In women, there is an impetus to try to deal with life, internal and external, in all its complexity. And they want to develop a voice of their own to communicate to others their understanding of life's complexity."





an explosion of personal accounts concerning the development of an individual's spiritual life. In addition to the stories of popular authors like Shirley McLaine and Gloria Steinem, there are more reflective models like Mary Catherine Bateson's Composing a Life,<sup>2</sup> Carter Heyward's A Priest Forever,<sup>3</sup> Etty Hillesum's An Interrupted Life,<sup>4</sup> and Leaving My Father's House.<sup>5</sup> Women have written thoughtful accounts of their own experiences to gain understanding for themselves, to be sure, but by disclosing their interior dialogues and struggles, they have encouraged countless others to pursue their inner leadings as well.

Secondly, the discipline of communicating to others about the spiritual growth and change I have experienced will provide accountability for my professional practice. By expressing what is important to me and the way in which I have arrived at my conclusions, I will disclose what is often a private, but crucial matter. I consider this approach parallel to the discipline all psychoanalysts undergo before they are qualified to practice their profession. Submitting my structure of authority and my interpretation of personal critical issues to qualified peers will benefit me and those I serve.

As I complete the writing and engage in dialogue with others, I hope to gain

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<sup>2</sup>Mary Catherine Bateson, Composing a Life (New York: Plume, 1989))

<sup>3</sup>Carter Heyward, A Priest Forever: The Formation of a Woman and a Priest (New York: Harper & Row, 1976))

<sup>4</sup>Etty Hillesum, An Interrupted Life (New York: Washington Square Press, 1981)).

<sup>5</sup>Marion Woodman with Kate Danson, Mary Hamilton, Rita Greer Allen, Leaving My Father's House (Boston: Shambala, 1993).



an appreciation for myself. As long as insights and reflections remain an internal dialogue, I cannot evaluate all that has happened and all I have concluded. By giving my experience external expression, I have an opportunity to relate to that body of material as somewhat separate from myself, an important step in strengthening my ability to make choices about how I use my personal resources in the work I do. A gain in self-awareness will mean I will have more clarity about who I am and what I can authentically offer to someone else.

Thirdly, it will fulfill the expectations of the program. Although my experience will be the starting point for reflection, it will not be the only voice reported. I want very much to speak from my own authority, but what I know has been shaped and defined by an extensive dialogue with individuals, writers and ideas. Those sources have been invaluable in clarifying and illuminating the course of my personal emergence-y. Equally important have been the conversations I have had with ten women who graciously agreed to talk to me about what is a very personal matter. Their enthusiasm for the project and their willingness to share important information with me has been the inspiration I needed when my conviction flagged.

I believe that a thorough account of spiritual emergence-y as experienced by myself and the women included in this study is an important addition to the body of literature about the practice of ministry. The conclusions of this project illuminate a topic that has potential importance for a segment of church membership, lay women at mid-life who may need to re-think major assumptions





or decisions as they change or as their circumstances change. At minimum, women can be strengthened and encouraged by the knowledge that the struggles that seem so private and isolated are not unique.

Additionally, the project addresses an issue that is not always a priority for feminist liberation theology. Because liberation has most often been defined in political terms, there has not been as much interest in examining the personal, interior processes that free an individual from oppressive internalized structures. There is no question that social structures and social relationships are the source of any individual's subordinate status and disempowerment. And there is no question that those structures and relationships must be confronted collectively to bring about justice. Nevertheless, for women who, for whatever reason, are unaffiliated with communities who support and encourage a social analysis, the process of emergence-y may be the entree into a more comprehensive analysis of her situation and the situation of others.

Women's spirituality is often described in relational terms -- I want to extend that perspective by exploring how a woman is related to herself and how a change in that relationship may be potentially empowering. This project examines one process that seems, in its outcome, to expand the range of agency and mobility of the women involved. The conclusions of the project suggest a way of conceptualizing the process which aids in understanding some of the features of the process, most notably the extended and difficult period of reaching a decision that has life-changing implications.



There are several assumptions that undergird this project that need to be identified and elucidated. Foremost among them is the conviction that the most powerful and persuasive analysis of the social structure and the power relationships of our culture is the feminist critique of patriarchy. In the words of Karen Bloomquist, a feminist writer, patriarchy is a system of

. . . social constructs that define the relationship between men and women as one of subordination and domination. Patriarchy is the complex of ideologies and structures that sustains and perpetuates male control over females. This historically created gender hierarchy of males over females functions as if it were natural. Patriarchy becomes a moral system in which power or control over is the central value not only in male-female relationships but throughout the social and natural order.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, as Sheila Collins elaborates, patriarchy

. . . connote(s) the whole complex of sentiments, the patterns of cognition and behavior, and the assumptions about human nature and the nature of the cosmos that have grown out of a culture in which men have dominated women.

Patriarchal thought is characterized by being objective rather than subjective, rational rather than intuitive, linear rather than circular or organic, logical rather than mystical, dissecting rather than unifying, abstract rather than concrete. . . Patriarchal institutions tend to be ordered along hierarchical 'chains of command' or 'lines of authority' rather than being communal or anarchic; they are exclusive rather than inclusive and are goal directed rather than maintenance oriented.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Karen Bloomquist, "Sexual Violence: Patriarchy's Offense and Defense" in Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique by Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989) p. 62.

<sup>7</sup>Sheila D. Collins, A Different Heaven and Earth (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974). p. 51)



According to feminist analysis, patriarchy affects all aspects of life. Collins outlines the scope of patriarchy with regard to human relationships:

The superior-subordinate paradigm has governed almost every conceivable human relationship: that between husband and wife, parent and child, boss and employee, priest and parishioner, president and people, teacher and student, principal and teacher, affluent and poor, white and black, brown, yellow or red, American and foreigner. It is a pecking order in which the direction of flow is from superior to subordinate and not the other way around. At its best it is paternalism; at its worst, tyranny.<sup>8</sup>

A second assumption that gives shape to this project is the conviction that many institutions of this culture express, in concrete ways, the values and principles of patriarchy. In addition, the same institutions transmit the values of patriarchy to the next generation, in effect assuming the role of reproduction in a male-dominated environment.<sup>9</sup> The institutions most obviously implicated in this process are marriage and family structures, religious organizations and government.

Finally, I assume that religion plays an additional role in the maintenance and reproduction of patriarchy by its power of legitimation. Peter Berger summarizes this function of religion in The Sacred Canopy:

There is both an objective and subjective aspect to legitimation. The legitimations exist as objectively valid and available definitions of reality. They are part of the objectified "knowledge" of society. If they are to be effective in supporting the social order, however, they will have to be internalized and serve to define subjective reality as well. In other words, effective legitimation implies the establishment

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>9</sup>Marilyn French, Beyond Power ( New York: Ballantine Books, 1985) p. 306.





of symmetry between objective and subjective definitions of reality...

...Religion legitimates so effectively because it relates the precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality...

...Religion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference.<sup>10</sup>

The Christian tradition has been dynamically related to the development and extension of patriarchy, having been shaped by the history of the Western world as well as giving shape to that history. The institutions and ideology of Christianity are intricately involved in maintaining the subordination of women as well as providing an apology for that subordination. Therefore, for women to challenge their subordinate position, they must come to terms, in some way, with the authority of religious institutions and with the institutions blessed by religious teaching.

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<sup>10</sup>Peter L.Berger, The Sacred Canopy (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969) pp. 32-33.



## CHAPTER II

*I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances, and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together.*

Virginia Woolf  
"A Sketch of the Past"  
Moments of Being

## MY STORY

The incident around which I tell my story is momentous in that it signals a major change in my life. But the truth of the matter is I had been changing for some time before that day in September when I packed my car and left a marriage that had endured for 23 years. For several years before that day and for several years afterwards, that decision has been the reference point around which I have most consistently focused my attention.

While the event itself has a kind of stark clarity about it, it would be a mistake to assume it represented an uncomplicated decision. The tangle of issues that held my husband and me enthralled was a combination of failed communication, divergent value systems and the urgency of my need to "take my





life in my own hands." "Who am I? What am I doing here?" were questions that reached a level of insistency I could not evade or postpone answering any longer.

For a long time, however, I did evade and postpone considering the questions. For almost two decades, there had always been good and sufficient reasons not to confront the dis-ease, not to name it accurately. For most of that time, I assumed more than my share of the responsibility for the failure of the relationship; I worked hard to make things work.

My former husband was ordained to ministry a week after we were married. The tension of our early years was associated with his need to establish himself in his profession while I struggled to define myself against a backdrop of anachronistic expectations of a minister's wife. At the same time I was trying to find my own way through a number of theological issues. Those two questions, identity and meaning, were the undercurrents of many of our differences. Those questions became submerged almost entirely during the years I coped with the needs of our children and the dislocation of several moves.

There are a number of possible explanations for my leave-taking -- five years ago I was returning to an unfinished task of adolescence, I was experiencing the distress of pre-menopause, I was recognizing the approach of an empty nest and loss of a significant aspect of my identity. All may contain some truth, but none fully account for the personal tumult I experienced. Over the years, I tried several ways to relieve the distress -- I was an organizer for the Nestle boycott, I enrolled in seminary, I found part-time employment. "I" could not be satisfied.



Five years ago, on that September day, I made the most difficult decision I have made in my life. After years of doubt and questions about what was the "best" thing to do, I left my marriage. I choose my words carefully. More than anything, I left marriage as much as I left my husband, the house I had lived in for ten years and the place of relative security and respect that I had had there. Today I can say I left my marriage. Then I was clear I was leaving Allen.

Today I recognize that several factors converged to move me toward the decision to leave. The one I had most difficulty owning was the simple desire to be free of the accumulated patterns and expectations of the situation. I wanted to find ways to live which more accurately reflected who I believe I am. But in order to generate the necessary energy to make the change I focused on the failures and frustrations of the relationship between me and my husband.

By the spring of 1987, I knew I had to acknowledge how serious the distress had become. In six months, I lost 15 pounds. My body was telling me that I needed to pay attention to some important issues. Something had to change.

I knew and I refused to know. On the one hand I had been plotting my course for some time. It could even be said that my decision to enter seminary was the first concrete step I took to make it possible to leave. That was as early as 1980.

Like many women of my era and background, I married shortly after I completed college, in part because I had no compelling reason to do otherwise. Up to that point, I had made several decisions that broke new ground for my family.



I finished high school. I enrolled in college. Nevertheless, I couldn't imagine myself (give myself an image) beyond graduation. At the same time, I felt family and peer expectations to marry and settle on a life's course closing in around me. That I had resisted them successfully for four years felt like a major accomplishment.

I was not ready for marriage. Although I was adult enough to handle the adjustments, the joint decisions, even the minutiae of setting up a household, I wasn't ready because I had not had enough experience of living, of testing myself and my abilities, of learning enough about myself to enter a relationship freely and intelligently. But few of my generation, on the cusp of the second wave of feminism, knew how much we needed that time.

If I knew little about the consequences of entering a relationship without sufficient knowledge, the partner I chose knew even less. Now I can name the anguish we struggled with again and again. But through all those years of ups and downs, tugs and pulls, the best I could do was to recognize, in a vague unfocused way, that I was unhappy a significant portion of the time.

I grew up in a family whose primary values were loyalty and endurance. My father was one generation away from the "old country." His German peasant heritage served him well in our community since ninety percent of the people there shared our ethnic background. The worst embarrassment imaginable in that context was a family member who failed to keep his/her word. The word "divorce" passed the lips of my relatives rarely, and then only in whispered judgement.





There were few models of family behavior that would have helped me know how to negotiate on my own behalf when joint decisions needed to be made. My husband's family was similar to mine; neither of us were well-prepared to manage a marriage that had to meet the challenges of the 60's and 70's.

During our years together, there were crises that brought into sharper relief my difficulty with the relationship. I remember several times asking myself whether it would be better for both of us if I could find the courage to say I wanted to leave. But the question would be set aside; even though Allen and I could not find resolution for our difficulties, we believed our children would benefit from stability. That joint commitment to our children carried us through.

In addition to coping with the unhappiness I felt, I used a lot of energy to keep unacknowledged what my true desires were. Even now I remind myself of the necessity for the decision I made. I still want desperately to feel justified, in spite of the vision/dream.

The dream came to me in September after I left and landed safely in Lawrence Hall with the assurance that I would be sheltered for the coming year. I know I wasn't asleep when it appeared, but I can't remember any of the circumstances that accompanied the dream. In a moment of solitude, the image of Lady Justice emerged in my consciousness. She was seated on a substantial stone dias, blindfolded. In her extended left hand she was holding a scale. With her right hand she was hugging the books of law close to her side.



Standing in front of her, I was quaking, a feeling that is all too familiar when I feel confronted by someone I think is demanding an explanation of me. She sat in stony silence, implacable and unmoving. As the seconds passed, before I had composed a response to the unspoken question, I began to feel angry. Why should this woman demand an explanation from me when she couldn't even see what was in front of her? By what right could she expect me to explain myself when she was hiding behind the safety of that blindfold, refusing to see me or anyone else in our particular plights? If she wasn't going to look at me, to recognize who I was and my unique situation, I wasn't going to tell her anything. And so I stood there a bit longer.

My quaking turned to restlessness, then to curiosity. Finally, I began to look at her. When I let myself pay attention, I noticed that the muscles in her left arm were weary; they sagged ever so slightly, just enough to let me know they were tired of holding the scale. Then I looked at her face. True, it wasn't animated but instead of being stoic and immobile, it looked sad, sad and stuck. It occurred to me that if I were forced to wear a blindfold all the time and had my hands full holding up a scale and clutching heavy law books, I'd feel sad and impotent too. The longer I stood there, the more sympathy I had for her situation. She might be as stuck as I was in a role she would rather not have.

I decided to help her get free of her burden. I climbed up on her lap to take the scales from her. I could almost hear a sigh of relief as her arm dropped to rest on the arm of her chair. She didn't resist when I removed the books and put





them beside the chair. Finally, I reached up to remove the blindfold; I slowly and gently untied the knot and let the cloth drop.

Her eyes were deep and understanding; she looked at me. Without a word, she gathered me up in her arms and hugged me close as I snuggled in her lap. I was warm. I was safe. My fear was gone. Lady Justice had become Lady Wisdom, Sophia.

The appearance of this image helped me let go of my obsession to explain the "why" of my decision. It was an important contribution towards getting on with what I had to do next. It was powerful; it addressed an issue that had long been part of my struggle -- how to explain myself and my choices. The dream gave shape and form to my worst fear -- that I would be judged and found wanting. Finally my exasperation helped me pay enough attention to the part of myself that sat in implacable judgement to be able to enter into the reality behind it, to see that it was taking great effort on the part of both persons in the dialogue to maintain the roles. It was a relief to recognize that both sides wanted an end to the interminable and futile exchange. Both sides were locked into responses that blocked satisfaction. Liberation was changing the script.

Something changed in my inner dialogue. The new connection eliminated some of the high-pitched insistent voices which demanded attention. I had more energy to attend to other voices.

Five years ago, the vision brought relief. I accepted it and celebrated its message. I understood I could forgive myself for choosing a course that was open



to interpretation. At least a part of me was willing to announce a truce and offer some measure of comfort in an otherwise turbulent emotional and spiritual time. I felt the dream's appearance was a "revelation," inspired by a purpose that intended integration and resolution of impossible tensions. It communicated care and sympathy, qualities I needed badly to experience from myself and from others.

It wasn't the only vision/dream which appeared to me in the course of wrestling with the decision. Before I was fully conscious of what I wanted to do, I vacillated between yes and no, changing my mind, not feeling ready to say what I knew probably needed to be said. In the throes of one of those times of panic another image came to mind.

In it I was thrashing about in a vast ocean -- nothing on the horizon and no telling how deep the water was. At first, that realization contributed to my feeling of panic. As I struggled to keep my head above the surface, I glanced to my left and slightly behind me. There, close enough for me to swim to, was an old-fashioned sailing ship, what I would imagine the Bounty might have looked like. It was listing badly, but still afloat. If I wanted, I could have gotten on board again. The boat was damaged and taking on water; it appeared to be sinking. I realized it was my marriage. If I chose to swim back to cling to it or even attempt to get back on board, I felt pretty certain that I would go down with it. I would not be able to survive its break-up because I would be trapped in the wreckage as it slipped below the surface. I paused to consider. At the moment, I was free of the wreckage and any potential danger. I knew how to float, so instead of using up



precious energy, I could relax and wait to see what would develop next. Since there was nothing visible on the horizon, it made no sense to strike out swimming in any direction. I felt clearly that the challenge I had to face was to trust that the water would hold me up until the next task became apparent. I was to trust that I would be all right not knowing what that would be.

As I pondered my decision, I didn't know what I wanted because there were too many voices talking all at once. A part of me wanted to know what it would be like not to have to accommodate to the needs and expectations of my family who had grown accustomed to that accommodation. Another part wanted to be accepted by my family, a family whose most important value was loyalty, whose code of honor was summed up by faithfulness to commitments. Most importantly I wanted to be able to explore who "I" was and to be able to make choices about how I would spend my life based on that knowledge. Apart from my roles, who was "I"? I knew, at some deep level, that I could not answer those questions as long as I was embedded in the tangle of relationships which threatened to hold me prisoner.

It's important that I know how my life was renewed. Now that I have come to a fuller understanding of the process, it is appropriate that the new knowledge be put to service in the community of my sisters.





### CHAPTER III

*Now we are going to make a new way path. So you take shovel, you take a ground-hacker, you take a hairpin. If all you got is a hairpin, you take a hairpin and you start digging. And you dig in all directions: up and down, in and out, right and left. Not in a straight line. Nothing natural or interesting goes in a straight line. As a matter of fact, it is the quickest way to the wrong place. And don't pretend to know where you are going. That means you've been there, and you are going to end up exactly where you came from.*

Naomi Newman  
Snake Table

### MY SISTERS

There is a generation of adult women who are challenged by a peculiar set of circumstances related to the accident of their time and place of birth. They are women who were born too late to be fully invested in the American Dream of the 50's -- security in the suburbs represented by a hard-working husband, three or four children, a dog and a station wagon. They are women who were born too early to be fully engaged in the iconoclasm of the 60's -- the excitement of leaving old forms behind and inventing new patterns of living. The women whose formative years had neither the unchallenged certainty of the 50's nor the idealistic conviction of the 60's have felt the tug and pull of their inbetween status.

These women were young adults when Vatican II was convened and Betty Friedan published The Feminist Mystique. Consequently, they could hardly avoid



considering the question, "What is authoritative for me?" As former sources of authority were shaken, they had to consider whether they wanted to remain loyal to what had once been taken for granted, whether to accept an altered version of formerly sacrosanct institutions, or whether to join in the exhilarating but anxious task of creating and experimenting with new configurations of basic human organizations. Both family and church, two fundamental institutions with which women's destinies have been intimately linked, had been critically examined and found inadequate, at least as they had been constituted up to that time.

As women considered their response to the challenges, some things had changed that would never return to their former status. Not only had institutions of authority been challenged and were undergoing revision, the whole notion living by the requirements of external authority was shaken. If the sources of legitimation that had been trusted for generations to provide a framework for living had been flawed, what was trustworthy? Was there an ultimate Authority? Or had we entered an age of relativism with ideologies pitted against each other in an interminable struggle for ascendancy?

The second challenge was a consequence of the first. Once certainty about living in an ordered (and ordained) society was proven to be a mistaken assumption, it was clear that women not only had choices, but they had to make choices. The awareness of choice meant women were, inevitably, more self-conscious than they had been before. Consciousness-raising groups were an





important, spontaneous response to the emerging realization that women needed to consider how to proceed under new conditions.

The group of women born during WWII, just before the Baby Boom generation, are women who were formed by one era but required to live their adult lives adjusting to a very different one. They are the older sisters of the fortysomethings of the present. They have coped with turbulent times -- their stories reveal how they have dealt with the disintegration of one way of looking at life and finding another way to value and cherish a new life. The necessity of coming to terms with a new reality that was very different from one's expectations is not new - - a case could be made that that process belongs to every one. Although each generation faces its unique challenges, this cohort has a unique historical position and their lives reflect how they coped with the issues that were theirs.

The social upheaval that we know as the 60's has been well documented. Those of us who lived through those times remember how electric events seemed to be. We remember how intense the questions were, how important it felt to ensure the right outcome. There is no doubt our society was transformed by the monumental struggles of those times.

What has been less well documented is the way the social transformation affected individuals. While people tell their stories with reference to very personal events, it is impossible to hear the implications of what they are saying apart from the backdrop of their context. The ebb and flow of social tides carry every small



boat with the current -- tracing the voyage of any one of them requires knowledge and appreciation of the forces that moved the entire generation.

Among this generation of women there is a group whose particular experience is considered in this thesis project. They are women, who after careful consideration, reversed a major life commitment, one that they thought was permanent at the time it was made. This project examines the stories of women who, like me, decided to change the course their lives had been taking for some time. The project focuses on the period of time women spent pondering their choices and investigates how their spiritual lives were related to the process.

My own experience was memorable in its intensity, its duration, its features and its outcome. I wanted to know if my experience corresponded with that of other women in similar circumstances. Did those of us who lived through the dramatic changes of the last several decades experience the same kind of difficulties as we considered making a major change in our lives? Were we self-conscious about the way our choices challenged the accepted authority of the institutions we were leaving? What helped us through a significant transition? I was especially interested in the spiritual biographies of the women I interviewed. I wanted to know how their spiritual lives were related to the changes that happened to them and the changes they made for themselves. In my experience, there was a close association between my growing self-awareness and what I understood to be spiritual experiences.

When I first began to recognize that I might have to consider leaving my



marriage as a way to relieve the distress I was feeling, I found several ways to avoid openly acknowledging the scope of my choices. I also found ways to avoid seeing the depth of the differences between my husband and myself. I spent considerable effort to convince myself that the conflicts weren't as serious as I sometimes thought; I just couldn't see the resolution. No one else in the situation seemed to be as bothered as I was, so it couldn't be as painful as I thought it was. Denial was the way I could reconcile what seemed to be an impossible set of options. I felt confused and frustrated a good deal of the time. I felt trapped and stuck.

Eventually, I broke through the impasse and made a choice. I escaped the repetitive, exhausting cycles of self-doubt and decided on a course that held more promise for personal growth and satisfaction. But it was not a "reasonable" choice although there was adequate evidence to warrant the decision. It was important to me that the decision be defensible, but the precipitating factor was not the logic of the situation. The impulse that moved me through the decisions had a source that is less explored and less understood than the more familiar and accepted "reasons" for making significant decisions.

Although I felt the outcome of the process was "liberating," the experience didn't altogether match the models of liberation that I had studied. My decision took a long time -- I reached a conclusion after years of consideration. And I needed something more than reasons to finally say, "Enough!"

So the question I had is this: How do you account for the shift from denial and minimization to a stance that is ready to consider the question in its fullness?





Where does the motivation come from? How does the energy get tapped and released? Also, after the question has been fully explored, how do you account for the motivation to make a choice that requires voluntary relinquishment of a significant piece of oneself, one that includes constructing a new self-definition, and one that has no guarantees concerning safety and security? That it can happen at all amazes me; that it happens frequently is astonishing.

For myself, I had experienced several surprising "interventions" that I believed to be spiritual in nature. These interventions were helpful in springing traps that had me caught and in propelling me through the many fears I had about making a choice for myself. They were an integral part of the decision making process that changed the course of my life. While I doubted neither the reality nor the value of these experiences, I wanted to know if other women, while they were in the throes of making changes in significant life commitments, found similar spiritual resources to be helpful in the process.

I decided to interview women who had made a choice to leave a significant life commitment and to focus on the role of spirituality during the time of decision. To provide a basis for comparison, half the women in this study have chosen to leave a marriage, half have chosen to leave a religious order.

I focused on these two distinctive life experiences because I felt they had much in common. A decision to marry or to enter a religious order carried with it, at the time this cohort made the decision, an expectation that the choice was a life's commitment. I assumed a similar seriousness of purpose for the initial



commitment, a similar anguish at the prospect of dissolution and a similar sense of loss if the commitment was set aside. As an indicator of the seriousness of the initial decision, I interviewed women whose marriage or professed life was of at least fifteen years duration.

Both choices carried an extensive set of expectations that were fairly well defined. As the second wave of feminism emerged in the 60's to challenge the assumptions made about women's role in marriage, Vatican II set off a similar examination of religious life. In both situations, women were expected to give allegiance to institutions that valued men and expected women to assume a subordinate role. In both cases, a decision to reverse one's choice often meant serious challenges to personal relationships in one's family of origin as well as with friends. In both situations, women contributed hidden economic benefits to the institution and, because their contributions were not acknowledged, they were at a competitive disadvantage and faced economic hardship if they separated themselves from the institution. My intuition that the two groups shared similar challenges was confirmed when one of the former nuns said to me, without prompting, "I feel like I've just been through a divorce."

At a more profound level, making a decision to leave a marriage or to leave a religious order carried the weight of directly opposing what the Christian tradition has celebrated as appropriate roles for women. Further, for women within the tradition, a choice to leave an institution blessed by the Church can also be interpreted as repudiating God. The promise to remain faithful to the vows the





women made at the time of marriage or profession was made "before God;" before any of them could decide that leaving the situation was best for her, she had to consider how to renegotiate her relationship to God. I believe that there are many women at mid-life who consider similar questions of leaving or remaining in a situation that involves a life commitment and make the decision to stay. By focusing on those who decide to leave, I in no way imply that the issue is any less significant or agonizing for those who make a different choice. Neither do I assume the women who remain have spiritual lives that are significantly different from those that I have interviewed. I included those who made the choice to leave because they are more easily identified -- their choice puts them in a recognized category, divorcee or former nun. Women who have considered changing their life commitment and made a decision not to change are difficult to locate. Researching their stories would be a fascinating follow-up to this project.

I made the assumption that a time of crisis appropriately defines the population of this study project; it is a time of heightened awareness, making memories more vivid than at ordinary times. I also assumed that if a woman relied on spiritual resources at all, a time of crisis would intensify rather than diminish that reliance. Finally, times of crises are often defining moments, the occasion for making decisions about meaning. I was curious to see whether and how that might be revealed in the stories of the women I interviewed.

What I am investigating has few precedents. To my knowledge, no one has asked this population for the kind of information I am seeking. The indefiniteness



of the phenomenon makes it a fascinating question at the same time it makes it difficult to investigate. That is why an open-ended interview, guided by a protocol of issues to be addressed is the appropriate method of investigation. At the outset I hoped that women would be able to identify a spiritual aspect of experience, but I did not assume that spiritual resources would play a role in everyone's decision-making. Every woman invited to participate was given a brief description of the project and its focus. Only one woman who was contacted said she had no recollection of spiritual activity during the period being investigated. All others, whether they were eventually interviewed or not, acknowledged a spiritual aspect of their experience.

I wanted to leave the definition of spirituality as open as possible. If I defined what I was looking for, I would be suggesting a framework for understanding the phenomenon I wanted to learn more about. I was caught in the impossible place of hoping I could conduct an open-ended process that would yield enough information to propose another way of looking at women's spirituality and of knowing language and tradition would have already provided a way to interpret what each of the women had experienced. Still, my own experience had included episodes that I felt were "spiritual" but did not conform to what I would ordinarily define as spiritual. Those experiences were powerful and memorable, in part, because they did not fit my categories or expectations.

"Spirituality" has many associations and connotations; consequently it is elusive as a research category. Nevertheless, it evoked a thoughtful response from



every woman I interviewed. The word has currency among the general population. Even if there is no one single meaning attached to it, the word is charged with meaning. One of the findings of the project was learning how the word is used. The practice of ministry is done among people, most of whom are unaware of technical distinctions that fascinate professionals. To serve those people well, professionals have to be able to begin where they are, and that usually means listening carefully for the implied content behind such words as "spirituality."

In my proposal, I acknowledged that in order to understand the language of the spirit, there had to be a shared community for discussion to be meaningful. Since my native tongue is the vocabulary of the Christian tradition, the only group I can understand well is from that religious tradition. Consequently, I interviewed women who were or had been affiliated with a Christian church as their primary religious identity. I explored how individual women used the resources from the tradition and how they moved away from the tradition. To resolve a life crisis, in what way did women turn to the religious resources of their past? How elastic were the boundaries of the tradition? What spiritual resources did women use to weather a personal crisis?

Reaching the conclusion to interview women from the Christian tradition was a minimum framework. There are many subsets of Christian spirituality, so I would have to listen carefully to discern what each woman appropriated for herself. By acknowledging a broad tradition as the basic orientation for the study, but permitting each woman to locate herself within it, I felt I had reached a perspective





permitted the latitude I was searching for. By limiting the sample to women who identified themselves as Christian, I eliminated a number of other traditions and perspectives, among them feminist spirituality, New Age spirituality, women's spirituality as well as the many Eastern spiritualities.

In making the choice, I also made some implicit decisions about psychology. Each religious or spiritual tradition has its particular way of understanding "person" and therefore is related to a specific psychology. Clearly, the way Western culture defines "person" would be the context for the project, but as with the issue of spirituality, I wanted to see how the women I interviewed appropriated and used the material to understand themselves.

I conducted the interviews in the homes of the women. I did so because I wanted, as much as possible, to create an atmosphere of safety and trust. I asked women who were initially strangers to me, to disclose something of considerable significance to themselves to be used in a document over which they had minimum control. I wanted to demonstrate in some way my willingness to extend myself to them. All the women agreed to be interviewed before I made arrangements to meet them at home, so they made a decision on the basis of my description of the project and our conversation on the phone that they would risk discussing some important issues with me. I assume that conversations are less anxious in familiar surroundings than they are in strange locations. I assume that, consequently, the conditions were as optimum as could be arranged for a frank and open discussion.

Besides leaving to them the definition of spirituality and meeting them in a



place where they were in charge, I consciously worked to diminish the power differential between myself and my subjects. If they had reason not to trust me -- and an imbalance of power is the most common source of mistrust -- there would be little incentive for a woman to reveal intimate details of her life to me. As conversations progressed, I was careful to disclose segments of my story that, in part, reciprocated their disclosure, giving them personal information about me.

The ten women in my sample were chosen from among names suggested by friends and acquaintances. I contacted each woman by phone to explain the project and to seek her participation. Several women I spoke with declined to participate; several were not eligible because their situation did not conform to the guidelines I had set forth. I kept the sample evenly distributed between women who left marriages and women who left religious orders.

The sample is not a random sample. Not only is the selection process unscientific, it is much too small to be reliable in any statistical way. The project was intended to be a first exploration, an investigation and reflection on a phenomenon that needs further definition.

The women of the study occupy a particular niche in society, one that I share. Our social location gives our perceptions and our experiences a particular focus. We are privileged in that we are Caucasian and therefore a part of the dominant culture. Our Christian identification on the surface locates us with the majority; however, the way in which some of the women in this study have appropriated the tradition leaves them at odds with the mainstream interpretation





of the Christian heritage. The group of women in this study are vulnerable in two important ways. As women, they must contend with the social and religious milieu that continues to deny them full access as equal participants with men. Secondly, at mid-life, older than 45, the women I interviewed were also coping with the effects of a society that values youth and devalues wisdom, age and experience. These two factors have considerable economic consequences for these women who, having made a decision to step out on their own at mid-life, are often assuming full responsibility for their economic well-being for the first time in their lives.



## CHAPTER IV

*There are ways of thinking that we don't know about. Nothing could be more important or precious than that knowledge, however unborn. The sense of urgency, the spiritual restlessness it engenders, cannot be appeased.*

Susan Sontag  
Styles of Radical Will

### THEIR STORIES

The women I interviewed were wonderfully alive individuals, very different from each other in the details of their past and present, but they shared confidence and hope for the future. They are women who have seen and experienced a generous portion of life, both joys and sorrows, pain and pleasure. Their stories of emergence-y are inspiring, for each has come through the particular challenges dealt to them with integrity and strength. Their experiences bear witness to the power and grace available to us even during the times we feel most vulnerable, most confused, most alone.

Speaking to these women has been a privilege. I have been welcomed into their lives with warmth and hospitality. They have been generous and enthusiastic in their support of this project. I hope and pray that I can reciprocate as graciously as I have been received.

The account that follows is a woefully reduced summary of the stories I



heard. In the interest of respecting confidentiality, I have changed the names of the women I interviewed and have broken up individual narratives, disguising details that would reveal individual identities.

One thing that was most apparent in my own experience of making a life-changing decision was the length of time between the first tentative acknowledgments of a serious problem and making a choice to resolve the issue. As I set out on this project, I wanted to know if that were a common experience and, if so, what elements extended the decision-making process.

As I reflected on my own story and heard the accounts of others, I found the question can be subdivided further: 1) an exploration of the circumstances associated with the women's first decision--to join a religious order or to be married; 2) an examination of any early misgivings about that decision; 3) a description of how or why that first decision was called into question and the accompanying internal debate that ensued; 4) an account of a pivotal event that might be understood as a turning point in the process; and 5) a discussion of how the terms of the decision were framed when the choice was made.

To eliminate potential confusion, I will examine this series of questions as they apply to women who affiliated with religious orders first, then discuss them in relation to women who have been married. I will discuss similarities and differences between the two groups at the end of the chapter.





## **SISTERS**

### **First Decision**

Among the women I interviewed who had been part of a religious order, the process of coming to a decision was lengthy. From the time the first questions concerning the suitability of the commitment that had been made to the decision to reverse that choice, the internal debate ebbed and flowed. None of the women reversed her commitment in haste or without serious reflection. The recognition that a change was necessary was a gradual one; among the women of this sample the time involved was between two and twelve years.

This deliberation stands in contrast to the way each one made the decision to enter religious life. Only one among the five had experience of living independently before making a commitment to an order. Three entered their order's initial program shortly after they graduated from high school; the fifth began her experience as an aspirant in her order's boarding school after she completed grade school.

One woman, as early as grade school days, responded to an appeal by her teacher to commit herself to religious life. She was encouraged in the decision by a family member who often told her that she had been dedicated to God's service on the occasion of her grandmother's death. Growing up, she felt and absorbed the pain and confusion of the relationships among her family members and believed somehow she could heal them by becoming a nun. Later, she would recognize that she went, in her words, "from her mother's house to the mother house."



Manipulation by a grade school teacher played a crucial role in another woman's decision as well. The teacher informed the young woman's parents that she had indicated a desire to attend the order's boarding school for her high school education; she was enrolled in the aspirancy program without ever having a considered discussion with either her teacher or her parents. She was carried along by the expectations of the order and her family into postulancy. By the time she took her final vows, she felt she no longer had a genuine opportunity to postpone or reconsider the commitment. She, too, had been singled out as the family's representative in religious life; she remembers her grandmother's pride in the designation "(Grandma's) little nun."

Another young woman was also influenced by teachers who were nuns, but in her case, the experience of the community life of her high school teachers was so appealing she was drawn to religious life as an alternative to what she believed was her only other choice. Married life as she experienced it in her family was not what she wanted for herself. The relationships in her family were filled with pain, secrets and violence. At the time she could see only two choices; the experience of chaos in the one was sufficient evidence to choose the orderliness of the other.

### **Early Misgivings**

For some, doubts about the suitability of the life they had chosen emerged early. These first rumblings, however, had a different character than those that came later. Jane was plagued with questions of her worthiness. "I'm not good enough. How could God want me?" she asked herself as she prepared to make her





final vows. By her own account, the issue of her value as a person would become the theme of her narrative as she gradually realized over the next 20 years her need for independence from community life in a religious order.

For Audrey, her reluctance was evident in two telling incidents. When she packed to leave her family home to enter the novitiate, she included a six month supply of toothpaste, although the order had requested each candidate to bring sufficient personal supplies for the first year. Later, at the time of her second year renewal vows, she was unable to speak for herself during the ceremony. She says, "I broke down and cried and couldn't recite the vows. The mother general had to say it for me, holding my hand and saying, 'Sister, do you want this?' And I kept saying, 'Yes, of course I do, yes.' . . . What I realize now is that there was something deep inside of me that was protesting. But I didn't know that."

For both of these young women, the need to be a "good daughter," a "good sister," stilled that small questioning voice. Their habit of obedience to others' expectations, brought with them from their families of origin, dulled the edges of their restlessness and led them to hope that the implicit promise of their bargain would be fulfilled. As Audrey said later in her interview, "I was good, you see. I was good, a good girl, a good sister, a good daughter and in being good, somehow, was being happy. If you did all the right things. . . that would guarantee you happiness. . . I did all the right things, not only in relation to traditional spirituality, in relation to the religious community, but also in terms of what my family was. (I expected) if I did the right things, then I ought to be happy."



Both Linda and Mary found their novitiate to be difficult. They chafed against the many restrictions they encountered during their formation. In Linda's case, she accepted the process, understanding that limits were inherent in entering religious life. Although she did not openly resist what was asked of her, she formed her own evaluation of what was happening--through those early years, she maintained her independent stance, neither questioning her right to hold it, nor wavering from its conclusions.

Mary dealt with her dissatisfaction with hope. She remembers, "In high school, I was seeing and experiencing freedom, freedom that the sisters had. And the affirmation and the respect. They actually communicated, 'I like you.' . . . And that's what happened, I think. That's what attracted me. I was so hungry. And I wanted to give that to others too. It was sad really. I didn't realize that I didn't have enough to be able to give it away."

Mary describes her novitiate as "hellish." She struggled to differentiate her feelings about her family from the difficulty she had with rules she felt were arbitrary and/or irrelevant. She admits that the structure imposed on her life was, in some ways, appealing; it was an attractive contrast to her family's chaos. Still, she recalls the times when she and others evaded minor regulations. The theme of her narrative is the struggle to differentiate herself from a group, her effort to distinguish herself in some way so that she could be recognized as an individual with unique gifts and needs. But in the beginning, she said, "The romanticism carried me through the early years."



Sue entered the order just as they were beginning to initiate the reforms inspired by Vatican II. The changes were so profound that her order suspended the rite of final vows until they gained clarity about what the order was asking young women to promise. Because Sue was older than those who entered with her, she was soon marked for leadership. "I was listened to. I was respected. I was part of a democratic process of creating our own life." She was involved in giving shape to the program she was supposed to be experiencing--her classmates were pioneers in experimenting with new forms of community., From the beginning Sue's experience was unlike others in my sample. Her novitiate was never as restrictive as that of others. She had responsibility to shape and create programs as a professional at the same time she was involved in reforming her community's life. She recalls, "We developed our own program and threw out all the old rules. It was a time of lots of excitement. There was always a sense of what went before and feeling caught in the middle. (But) there was a lot of excitement and a lot of hope. We felt we could create anything, make something new. We were involved in all the justice issues, protest against the war, civil rights, all the justice issues, all that was opening the doors of the church. It was a real exciting time."

For Sue, being part of an order was a satisfactory way to fulfill her desires for herself as she understood them at the beginning. She found opportunities for the kind of growth and development she wanted and needed. The trajectory of her community and her own path coincided well--her need to reevaluate her commitment became apparent much later.







All of the women in my sample remained in religious life for at least two decades, several for much longer. All of them survived the vicissitudes of their years of formation and decided to continue with religious life in spite of whatever level of misgivings they might have had. I expect the experiences I have related about those early years are not especially remarkable; for years young women had made decisions to enter religious life for many similar reasons and had decided to proceed in spite of ambivalences in much the same way. What is interesting about the lives of the women in this sample is the effect of the reforms associated with Vatican II.

### **Misgivings to Questions**

For women in religious life in the late 60's and early 70's, Vatican II inspired changes about almost everything they thought were settled issues. As individual women absorbed the implications of the sweeping reforms, they realized much more was at stake than was first apparent. As Mary remembers, during the renewal chapter of her order in 1968, she was "struck by how complete the change would be. We would have to look at our own life and commitment. The changes were not just external, but would require a change of heart."

The external changes were obvious. Communities revised the way they conducted their lives--they abandoned many of their restrictions, simplified or eliminated habits, made living in a convent optional and no longer determined the professional life of their members. In spite of these changes, or in some cases because of these changes, many women decided to leave religious life. The



numbers were significant. One woman in the sample reported that by the end of her second year, 50% of the class had departed. Others reported the steady attrition of their classes as women decided, once the choice was more obvious than formerly, that life in a religious community no longer fit who they were.

For those who remained, several feelings were stirred up. On the one hand, several women in the study remarked how shamed individuals were made to feel as they departed. They disappeared "out the back door" with only a cursory "X is no longer with us." These practices had a chilling effect on those still in the order; no one wanted to be erased as though they had never been a part of the community.

Others recalled how powerful other, more ambivalent feelings were. "I remember a mixture of feelings about those people who were leaving, feeling abandoned and feeling angry, feeling some twinge of, 'I wonder. . .'" With so many women re-evaluating their commitment to religious life, few could avoid confronting the question for themselves. Audrey explained it this way: "You know, from '67 on when we would have a large group meeting and so forth, we would ask ourselves and ask each other the question, 'Why do you stay?' And there was always reason to stay. It was hope. . . I know I was looking for the perfect family. . . We were doing things that were meaningful. We were beginning to do some social justice work. We were beginning to challenge the way we lived together. . . So there was enough energy."

But in the middle years of their tenure, it became increasingly apparent to



the women in this study that the conditions of religious life frustrated them in significant ways. The clues were varied. For several women, living in community, in spite of the smaller size and fewer regulations, became more and more difficult. As the formal structure relaxed and roles disappeared, the success of community life depended more and more on the strength and vitality of interpersonal relationships. As the size of the group living together became smaller, there were fewer options for relationships; when personal differences emerged between individuals, they couldn't be avoided or managed in the same way as in a larger community. The time of transition, of learning new ways of community living, required patience, energy and commitment. In her interview, Jane spoke several times about the agitation, restlessness and frustration she felt during this period.

Mary reported several situations that were bruising to her--she felt controlled by the need to make community work. She observed "community" took precedence over individual concerns, that "to work things out for the good of the group required us to repress, suppress, whatever was needed for the common good." She continued, " I did feel very much that I needed to justify my existence, my need for leisure, my need for space, my style, my need to be quiet. . . I found community life to be very contrived in many ways."

Audrey also found coping with strained interpersonal relationships a factor in her growing dissatisfaction. She felt decisions about living situations were often arbitrary. She also felt disappointed on several occasions when friendships deteriorated when they were mixed with professional competition.







Decisions around career directions were also sources of conflict. In Audrey's case, the order communicated conflicting messages. On the one hand, she was invited to determine for herself where she wanted to work, but at the same time she was asked several times to take on difficult assignments that the order needed to be done. For a while, she acquiesced to the requests because she was reluctant to explore the question of what she really wanted.

Mary was also troubled by her order's decisions about her professional life. She feels lucky to have found a satisfying career after several false starts. She openly wonders, however, why her order found it necessary to suggest she needed to change her location when she repeatedly expressed satisfaction with her present situation.

In Linda's case, her growing frustration was associated with deep philosophical differences with some of the doctrines of the Church. After years of participation in social justice issues, she became increasingly aware of the differences between her convictions about some issues and the stance of the Church. She focused her attention more and more on women's issues; she participated in the movement for the ordination of women. As her commitment to the needs of women became stronger, she felt her loyalty to the Church shift.

If these women experienced significant elements of dissatisfaction with religious life, they also experienced rewards. Those rewards were most frequently associated with the work the women were doing. We have already considered Sue's situation--her career flourished in early childhood education. After she



administered a successful program in one area, she was invited to initiate and develop a similar program in another challenging situation. Later her skills would be in demand in Central America. She was recognized for her gifts by her order and had much latitude in how she engaged them in each situation.

Jane's life was made more bearable when the work she was doing gave her an opportunity to travel. As the person responsible for a new program of continuing formation, she was able to work independently and creatively. The limitations she felt with community living were mitigated during the time she was assigned to this task.

Linda also found a way to remain with the order in spite of her misgivings. She engaged in a new career, leaving teaching to become a retreat director. For 10 years, the satisfactions of the new work gave her reason to stay.

In spite of frustrations, for several of the women the security of religious life was important. Several recognized how crucial the nurture of the order was for them as they risked asking questions they never thought they would have to address. Several expressed gratitude as they reflected on the opportunities and the encouragement they received from their orders during the time they struggled to find their way in new territory. Some of the support they received was from individuals, other kinds of support came from the institution as programs and opportunities. Even those most frustrated with community life voiced regrets for relationships that changed as their decisions took them away from the structure and friends they had relied on for years.



For two of the women, extended personal relationships with men relieved some of their unhappiness and distracted them from having to confront their fundamental dilemma. As one said, "You know, if you have an affair, you can stay in a bad marriage. That's what we were doing, helping each other stay (in religious life)." For the other woman, her friendship of five years was her first experience of loving and being loved; although it was a platonic relationship, it was deeply satisfying and sustaining for her.

The gathering storm of frustration and dissatisfaction, however, threatened to break through the distractions and the sources of contentment. For at least two of the women, the internal conflict seemed so impossible to resolve that they became clinically depressed to the point of expressing suicidal thoughts.

One woman, at the depth of her personal and professional crisis, blurted out when asked what she wanted to do, "I want to die." In subsequent days, she would pray for some tragic accident to happen so she would not have to go on, so she would not have to make a decision to relieve her unhappiness. The depths of her despair propelled her into counseling for the first time in her life. She was able to deal with some of her issues, but the resolution in favor of leaving was several years away.

A second woman in a similar personal and professional crisis also sought counseling when depression and thoughts of suicide threatened to overwhelm her. At the end of two years of therapy, she had made a choice to live. From that time forward, her decisions about herself and her life were based on that touchstone.





The threat of death was expressed in other ways in addition to thoughts of suicide. For several women, there came a point in their struggle when they feared for a significant part of themselves. Jane, for example, stymied in a professional conflict and feeling isolated and lonely, realized one day, "My God, I can't live anymore." Audrey, in the throes of a crisis of relationships, began to experience a rising sense of panic that she later associated with several childhood memories. During the crisis, she began to be able to say out loud, "I feel like I'm going to lose my life." She understood how profound the signal was, went into therapy and vowed not to finish until she "had the answer."

It should not be surprising that in this group of women, it was necessary for them to consider what a decision to leave the order would mean for their relationship to God. The question was a significant subject during the time these women debated whether their future was tied to their order.

At the beginning, to be sure, there was a strong sense of having made a promise to God as well as before God. As one woman said, "I took my commitment to religious life seriously. I struggled so much with my final vows. I felt I would be breaking a commitment to God and a commitment to my community (if I left)."

Mary recalled how her relationship to God took on a new dimension when she began to think seriously about what it would mean to leave the order. She said, "As I grew, I realized I had some choices, even though I wasn't able to act on all of them. I was struggling with what was authentic spirituality. A big part of the



question of leaving had to do with whether I could still be a spiritual person." The breakthrough came when she asked herself, "If I decided to leave, what kind of God is it who wouldn't understand if I changed my mind? Would I be struck dead?" She moved forward with her decision "at the risk of disappointing, betraying a God that I thought I had given myself to." I realized then that I had, but God was a merciful compassionate person and nothing would happen. I wouldn't be beaten to death. . . I recognized my perception of God could be my prison. Changing was more a result of changing my perception of who God is than changing my relationship to God."

Audrey had a similar insight, allowing her earlier beliefs about God's desires for her to be replaced by something new. She said, "I began to realize that God didn't have a case for whether I was in the convent or out of the convent or sitting outside the door or what. That wasn't God's issue, that was mine."

Jane was able to find release from her impasse this way: "Somehow I came to an experiential sense that my baptism is really my original commitment to God. Trying to be faithful meant paying attention to God's movement in my life. If that meant staying in religious life, that's what it means; if it meant I leave religious life, that is what it means, but the basic underlying issue is trying to be responsive to God's movement in my life rather than commitment for the sake of commitment."

### **The Curve in the Road**

In all the interviews I asked the women whether they could identify an event that marked the turning point in their decision. Several women described situations



that were important, either as the point at which their questions were first framed or as an event that left them with no doubt how serious the issues were. Although some remembered a significant incident in the process, all described the decision as a growing awareness. As we shall see, the pace of the decision proceeded at varying rates.

Jane and Audrey began to admit to consciousness the evidence of their unhappiness when they participated in extended training to become formation directors for their orders. The experience was unlike anything they had had before; their own formation had been conducted under the rubric of the pre-reform days when the goal of the process was to mold young women according to the model of the order. Much had changed; formation was becoming organized as a process of discernment. As Jane observed, formation under the new paradigm began by taking each individual as a unique person and building on who the person was. She experienced the training as both profoundly disturbing and profoundly freeing. Part of the program was the expectation that all those involved would engage in an extended period of discernment themselves. This process raised questions that challenged her and others to re-examine their values and commitments. It was, she said, " a tremendous turning point in my life."

Audrey, too, would say the experience was "pivotal." Like Jane, she reported how unsettling the new ideas were and how the training affected her personally. After her year of training she anticipated meeting the challenge of creating something new for her community. As she prepared to do so, she had to make a







decision to do something that was very difficult for her, to leave a career that was familiar and comfortable for a vocation that was totally new. In spite of this anxiety, the training experience was a time when her energy and enthusiasm for learning were renewed. On the strength of that renewal she accepted the invitation to begin to reflect on issues that she had ignored before.

Linda marks the beginning of the end by a 30-day silent retreat she took after a personal crisis when "everything started falling apart. Outwardly nothing was changed, but inwardly something was happening. I didn't know what was going on." During the retreat, which she labeled "pivotal," she spent some time considering whether she needed to leave the order. There was no strong reason to leave, so she decided to remain.

For these three women, these important experiences took place more than 10 years before any of them would ask to be released from their vows. As I listened to their stories, I felt a profound kinship with them as I heard how the debate ebbed and flowed for the next decade. Along the way, subsequent events - almost any change -- would sharpen the terms of the question and raise to consciousness in clearer ways how remaining in religious life was not best for them. I want to conclude this section by summarizing how the decision was framed at the time it was made. I include Mary in the discussion, for although she does not name specific occasions as points of orientation, she spent many years sorting out what she needed to do.



## Coming to Conclusion

For Jane, the final resolution of the question, once it was clearly focused, took a relatively short time. The process gathered momentum in a consultation with her spiritual director when she said, "'If I start looking at this stuff, I don't think I can stay in religious life.' I didn't know where that came from. It was a moment of truth, a moment of realness that came right out of my mouth. . . It felt like my life turned upside down. . . Even though I had felt rumblings, this had a different quality, like it hit the core of my being. There was no way I couldn't look at this."

At the end of her training for formation director, Jane had, in her words, "made a choice to live." In the final crisis of decision, the terms had a similar ring. "I have to leave because if I don't, I will not live." As a resource during those days, she relied on two portions of Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:19, "Choose life" and John 10:10, "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly."

At a final retreat a month later, Jane was at peace with her decision; she felt a sense that "it's OK to leave." By the time she moved three months later, "it seemed the most natural thing to be about."

Audrey described the points along the way toward her decision. After finding herself in a disappointing living situation several years following her training, she said, "I decided somewhat, without any kind of real process, decided I had to get out--out of the living situation, and probably the community. It was the first time I had ever said it out loud."



Later, she realized, "that for me to stay would be for me to deny myself. I finally knew I wasn't happy. I didn't know that I had never been happy so how was I to know what the difference was?"

She said, "The decision was a process, it was a growing toward and I think I knew it the day I said, 'I will do this.' It feels more like I came to it."

Linda did not identify other specific events after her initial experience of dissolution. She says of the early 80's, "I just didn't want any part of religious life any longer. I had had enough of so-called obedience and poverty. I felt that all the conferences and meetings only took us backward." She was very disappointed with the institutional church so her decision to leave meant loosening her ties to the church as well as to the order. Today she identifies herself as a spiritual person, but not Roman Catholic nor even Christian.

For Mary, an important component of the decision was reconciling her image of a single woman with what she thought she needed to do to have a legitimate, vibrant spiritual life. "As I grew, I realized I had choices, by asking the question, 'If I leave, can I still be a spiritual person?'" As she got closer to the decision to leave she concluded, "I realized how I felt and I had the courage to go with my experience. That's new. . . Once I started practicing that, I felt better about myself, I felt more adult, I felt more comfortable with God. I felt more comfortable with Jesus who could go about being this person for others; I knew what that felt like. . . Because of the spirituality aspects of it that I hold on to, that help me be who I am, I can turn around to say 'thank you' for what I have received from the





community and to leave behind the rest of it that isn't me." She continued, "The process of decision-making has been life-giving. To choose, to feel there is a choice, is life-giving."

In Sue's case, the decision to leave the order began later than for others. Like the others, it was focused on the issue of personal integrity. In the course of coping with a crisis that originated outside the order, she realized she needed time to recuperate from a series of stressful events. She took an informal leave of absence from specific responsibilities to give attention to herself and what she wanted for the future. During the time of that reflection she decided to acknowledge her sexual orientation and to take steps that would enable her to live out that awareness without feeling compromised or duplicitous. After devoting her life to speaking out on behalf of other marginalized groups, she wanted to be free to give voice to the issues that affected her in a very personal way. It was impossible to reconcile that conviction and stay in the order. She understands her decision to be one for herself, not a repudiation of others or of her experience as a woman in religious life.

Among these stories, a common theme is echoed. At some point, early or late, the women who left religious life confronted the question, "Who am I?" in a serious way. The corollary to that question was, "What am I doing here?" It is important, I think, to get the order of the questions right. As I listened to these women, I had the sense that their decision had more to do with their growing awareness of themselves and their needs than with a decision against an institution.



Their withdrawal of allegiance from an institution was overshadowed in importance by a pro-active decision to take themselves more seriously. None of them is actively anti-church or anti-religious life. Their choice to re-focus their attention was not coupled with a desire to engage in a debate or to fight with the institution which formerly shaped their entire lives. They have not wanted to destroy a myth so much as to declare it irrelevant.

None of the five feels drawn to regular attendance at Mass, but at the same time, they continue to acknowledge what the Church has contributed to their lives. As one woman said, "I don't know if I would be the kind of person concerned about justice issues in the same way if I didn't have the kind of experience I had growing up." She continued, " (I appreciated) growing into adulthood in a community of women concerned about justice. . . I think that kind of faith, that kind of inspiration and the attempt to be faithful to your own life's experiences as it acts itself out, has certainly led me to be who I am. I'm not sure if I had taken another path, I would be here."

## WIVES

### Early Decision

In some ways, the women who married seemed to have fewer choices than the women who entered religious life. Perhaps it is a function of the era in which they were contemplating their futures, but among the women who married, only one identified another woman as a possible role model for a career besides marriage. The women in this sample seemed to have had little material for their imaginations



to work with to generate alternatives. Even Nancy, the youngest of the group, described her decision this way, "I thought I was pretty liberated when I was young and angry as hell, but I just thought, 'Well, now it's marriage and children time. And so that is what I did. . . I just did what I was supposed to do."

Others echoed similar sentiments; their decision to marry had more to do with family and community expectations than with any considered choice on their part. One, at age 16, left a situation of dependency, "my mother's house," for a similar experience of dependency. Another left college at her mother's suggestion when she became engaged so they could "properly" prepare for the wedding. Later, she would recognize how long she lived through the plans set out for her by her family.

### Early Misgivings

Children arrived soon after the marriage; within two years of their wedding, the women in this group were immersed in the demands of child care. Second and third children, even the fourth, were born fairly close together. One woman had three children before she was 21. There was very little transition time before "wife" became "wife/mother." It is not surprising that the early and middle years of their marriages were taken up with issues associated with families. There was almost no opportunity to consider the question of satisfaction. They were too busy.

Several women enjoyed the role of mother--for them caring for their children and supporting their growth was a deeply satisfying experience. Their preoccupation with children softened the edges of any need to examine the quality





of their marriage relationship. If "wife" was not all it might be, "mother" absorbed excess energy and attention. Doris revealed how much she had identified with the role when she talked about how miserable she was on her postponed honeymoon. She and her husband married just as World War II began; her husband enlisted in the Navy and was away most of the early years of their marriage. When the war was over, they went sailing for a week, leaving their two children with relatives. She could hardly bear the separation. She said of herself, "Motherhood was the role I decided on."

Connie loved her children, commenting on the birth of her first child, "I couldn't believe the miracle. She was such a beautiful baby. She nursed her children at a time when the practice was uncommon. She found it a very sensuous experience, and personally rewarding. Of the early years she says, "Life was good. I had two beautiful children. I had friends, a wonderful social life, a beautiful home, a place in the community."

Beyond these vignettes the women had relatively little to say about their children's early years. From my own experience, I know how routine life is with small children--there is little to differentiate one day from another, so it is not remarkable there is little in the interviews.

What is remarkable is the level of concern and attention devoted to discussing children's adolescent years. In this study, women with children orient the description of their family life around the events of the late '60's and early '70's when their children made the transition from childhood to adulthood. It was a



wrenching time. As Doris put it, "For seven years, from 1967-75, things just blew up, in society and personally. Everything was in turmoil, everything was up for grabs. All I could do was keep listening. My middle daughter went to seven different colleges in seven years." Another woman, even today, speaks of that era with sadness and grief. Her eldest son--bright, sensitive, active in civil rights and well regarded on his college campus--took his own life while home on leave one Christmas rather than return to basic training and a sure assignment to Vietnam.

For other families, the pain of the era was less acute, but no less real. Almost every family had at least one young adult heavily involved in the drug culture. For some the problem persists as a struggle with alcoholism; for others the experimentation was fleeting, a kind of rite of passage for themselves and their peers. For Nancy, whose children made the transition in the '70's, the pain is fresh. Her eldest must receive dialysis several times a week as a consequence of his involvement with drugs. Pat faces a reprise of earlier struggles; she had hoped her youngest son, separated by 8 years from his older brothers, would be able to avoid the lure of drugs and alcohol. Recently he returned home after completing a treatment program.

### **Misgivings to Questions**

Concern and care for children never really subsides. The women of this group spoke at length about current issues associated with their children's situations. Although generally the women have accepted the "rightness" of their



decision to separate from their husbands, they are aware of the continuing effect that decision has for their children. One woman says this, "It bothered me that it would probably make it that much easier for my sons to marry and then to leave their wives. Two of them have, one very amicably, but one in a terrible battle that involves my grandson who is 6. Who's to say? It's a different age, but I'm sure it was easier for them not to work things out and that bothers me." As their children marry and establish families, these mothers give extra attention to the health of relationships, but respond with acceptance and sadness if a marriage of one of their children fails.

When the women spoke about their former marriages, I felt a contrast between the vivid, lively women in front of me and the sense of dullness and opaqueness that shrouded the personalities of their former husbands. Perhaps the paucity of detail can be attributed to the women's desire not to speak on behalf of another, perhaps the invitation to speak about themselves turned their attention away from reflecting any more on the former relationship. In any case, the personalities of the men involved in the marriages cannot be reported in much detail.

In three instances, alcohol became a "third" in the relationship, usually after several years of marriage and only gradually becoming a problem that had to be reckoned with. Sometimes recognizing the seriousness of the problem was delayed because the women came from families that knew how to cope with that particular dysfunction. In two instances, the women described their husbands as "closed up."





In all three of the relationships I picked up a sense of remoteness, isolation and distance. In one case, the man went for treatment several times, but was not able to stay with his resolve for more than a few years. In another situation, the woman joined her husband in drinking; part of her spiritual journey includes recovery for herself. The children of these families have been doubly tempted, once by the culture and secondly by their family history to turn to alcohol or other addictive substances for relief from pain or stress.

In the other two marriages, the break was a result of widening divergence in values and commitments between the partners. Connie speaks with energy and verve when she discusses the role she played in using her family's real estate business to promote civil rights in the early '60's. As her son reached draft age, she plunged into the anti-war movement. She also clearly remembers the impact of Betty Friedan's book, The Feminine Mystique. When she put it down, after reading it in one sitting, she said to herself, "I could have written that book!" Her husband was caught up in his profession and his career. They were on separate tracks that weren't even parallel.

Nancy said of the man she married, "We were generally attracted to each other and had a very good relationship, a very good spiritual relationship. We were also blind and didn't even see that we didn't communicate well. We had difficulty sharing emotion. When we parted there was the feeling that we were just not reaching each other." Later, as she described her efforts to return to school, she said, "It was the hardest time I think that I have ever had. There was no support.



My spiritual life was such that I was trying just to hold my own and not to ask anything of my husband, but just do what I needed to do, rather than ask what he thought about it. So what we started doing was to live parallel lives and get more and more distant."

Both Connie and Nancy initiated counseling for themselves as well as marriage counseling for the relationship. Connie reported seeing seven different counselors in a five year period, none of whom her husband had confidence in. In both cases, the experience was unsatisfactory -- the two parties continued to talk past each other.

In the middle years of their marriages, it became more difficult for the women not to notice how the choice they had made was no longer as compelling as it may have been at one time. But at the same time they experienced increased tensions in their relationships, they also found ways to nurture themselves and to gather resources for the future.

The issues of incompatibility were sharpened for three of the women when they were attracted to another man and became involved in an affair. These relationships may have had the effect of making a bad marriage bearable, but the women reported a second effect as well. For one, who said she "felt so sinful I could hardly stand it," the second relationship was a boost to her self-esteem and reassured her that she was still attractive and could still "give and receive love." As a way to bring resolution to her feelings of both shame and attraction, she asked for a divorce--her husband adopted a passivity that she felt brought the discussion



to a complete halt. In her words, "Well, we went on." It was several more years before she found the resolve to finish the discussion. By that time, she realized if anything was to change, she would have to take the initiative and would have to deal with being "the bad guy." Her husband's profound passivity precluded a joint decision.

For Nancy, a second relationship came at the time she felt most besieged by the competing commitments in her life. Her affair took on "an incredibly romantic role." The brief attraction absorbed a great deal of her emotional energy, a point not missed by her husband or herself. In spite of a confession to her husband about her affair, he did not want to go to counseling, nor did he want to end the marriage.

Connie's relationship also developed at a low point in her marriage. For her, the affair reinforced her feeling there was something significant missing in her marriage, an emotional connection that she yearned for.

The women in this group did not deliberately engage in an extra-marital affair as a strategy to make life bearable. The effect of their romantic attachments led each of them to conclude that there could be more to a relationship than what was happening. Their experience deepened their convictions that their marriages were inadequate.

For this group of women, the issue of shame played a significant role in postponing a direct confrontation with the question of whether to continue in their marriage. Family rules and expectations continued to shape how these women posed their dilemmas. As one woman put it, "I was hung up on the fact that I had





promised forever. My parents were deceased by this time, yet somehow or other there was a promise to them. You know, I didn't literally promise them, but the expectations were there." Diane said emphatically, "Our family doesn't divorce." And another said, "It's bothered me to think that I (divorced my husband) and that I was the first in my generation in my family and the only one still."

God's rules and expectations, as the women in this group understood them, also contributed to feelings of guilt and shame that extended their internal debate. One woman said, "there is a shame that I built up all my life and then I added the shame of actually (divorcing my husband). . . It went against all my upbringing. My mother never did divorce, though she should have. . . But I do feel the weight of the guilt. I made my first big confession after I left because it is a sin. Like other sins we do, it's all right. Something had to be done." The words do not convey the anguish this woman continues to experience. In the interview, it was clear that though she had reached a place of intellectual assent to her choice, emotionally she is still troubled. A little later in the interview she asked, "Now do you approve of me? Now have I acquitted myself?" She talked about the entity to whom the questions were addressed: ". . . it is not just my father (who is deceased), it is God. There is a very ambitious part of myself which says, 'you have got to get there.' . . . And so it is still an issue."

Another woman who stayed in a marriage longer than she wanted said, "All those years while I stood at the kitchen sink I felt I couldn't stand it another day. (But) I felt I had to endure. That's what I was taught. When I wanted to leave, I



reminded myself that you could really do what you want with your own life, but could you break your promise to God?"

### **The Curve in the Road**

As their children became increasingly independent and as they began to recognize their marriages were less than adequate, a third process was taking hold in the lives of some of the married women. Several women took advantage of opportunities for education or other training; these experiences were powerful in revealing to the women gifts and talents they had not believed they had. At every step, the women were able to see themselves as more-than, more than daughters, more than wives, more than mothers.

For Doris, the series of steps began with lay training experiences through her church. As her children entered high school, she accepted more and more responsibilities, culminating in her position as a parish consultant for her diocese. The training she received was heavily weighted in the direction of personal growth. She recalls a critical episode at a retreat where she and another person discussed their life stories with one another. As the final exercise, they were to draw up a life plan and contract with each other for the next steps they wanted to take. It was then she realized how badly she wanted to return to college. Within a month she was re-enrolled in the school she had left some 20 years before with a plan for graduation. Building on the self-awareness she had already accomplished, her school experience contributed mightily to her "growing into myself."

Diane entered college as well when her children were in high school. She



says of the experience, "I really felt turned on, in a way I hadn't felt turned on in a long time, as a person, myself, as an individual. That felt good and right and gave me strength to do what I felt for some time I needed to do. . .I loved going to school."

For Nancy, an opportunity to travel to Italy for a 3 week intensive workshop in psychotherapy represented the first choice she made for herself since her marriage began. It helped her see what was at stake in her relationship and in her vocational decision. Within a year she enrolled at a nearby school in a graduate course.

The kind of education Pat experienced is not what one finds in academic institutions. Pat's realization that she needed to take herself and her situation much more seriously than she had before came through the treatment program she entered to begin her recovery from alcoholism. She identifies her admission of powerlessness with regard to alcohol as the turning point in her life. She turned over decisions about how to order her life to a professional staff for a while as she gained strength in her conviction she had to make a change in her life. Through the support groups she met with regularly, she learned about her disease and herself. She became wise in ways that only those who have been to the bottom can become. She shares this insight, "It's been a wonderful journey. Sometimes I get so tired of thinking. If only I could stop! I didn't want to know myself, but yet if I wanted to be me, I had to know who I was. That was a struggle for growth. What I learned is that every time I see myself I can change the parts I don't like.







There was a lot to change."

For the women who married, these opportunities for education were associated with expanded opportunities for self-knowledge, as Pat's statement makes so clear. A second effect was to raise the level of awareness concerning the poverty of their relationships. As much as any other experience, these first steps into advanced education were the first conscious steps that led out of their marriages.

Now Diane can say about her decision to go to school, "It's pretty hard for me to say that I came (to a decision about a career) at a certain time, but there's no question in my mind that when I went back to school it was with that thought in mind. Even though it preceded the divorce I wasn't sure I wanted to be a professional woman or have a career then, but it would help me to feel I could stand on my own two feet. And I needed that, because I sure enough wasn't going to be with M forever. I didn't know when I wasn't, but I'm sure that he would see it as contributing."

Nancy says of her work in Italy, "It was my real conversion. . . I knew that was the time when I would have said I had to face that I was moving in another direction. . . I reviewed some of the questions I was asking (then): 'How can I balance this marriage with what I really want to do?' But I didn't know what I wanted to do yet. . . I was beginning to realize that I had never chosen anything."

Doris, put together the plans she needed to return to school; she was able to take classes for three days and return home for the remainder of the week. She says of that time, "I was not falling apart, my husband was. I was beginning to sense this



had to end, but I didn't see how to do it."

In Pat's case, all the advice and information she was given reiterated how difficult it would be to stay sober and stay in a relationship with her husband. When she stopped the behavior that enabled his alcoholism to continue, she was warned he would go to great lengths to subvert her resolve. She had to face the likelihood her marriage would not survive if she maintained her sobriety.

As the realization grew with these women that a change needed to happen or was coming, the only effective barriers to making the decision were the twin issues of family, expectations of the family of origin and fears about the effects a decision would have on children. Since there were few minor children involved, the question had less to do with issues of custody and support than they had to do with the implicit permission the decision conveyed to regard commitments to marriages as less than ultimate. The concerns Diane expressed were shared by others.

### **Coming to Conclusion**

Pat learned her support group was correct. Her husband was not ready for sobriety and did everything he could to test her decision. So before the year was out, she asked him to leave. For her, unlike the other married women, the anguish followed the decision. "For two years after the divorce, I had never felt such grief. . . It was some months later I said to myself, 'You have come so far and you are allowing one person to cause you all this pain.' I said quite a few dirty words to him. . . It was the end, the bitter end, but it was an end. . . and I could let him go."



It was in Doris' second year of school when she came home one winter afternoon to find her husband slouching in the living room in his foul weather gear, dead drunk. It was the point at which she said, "Enough." She told him she was leaving for college that evening. She didn't want him there when she got back. He moved to a motel room nearby and then to a small house in their town. The actual divorce came several years later, an amicable process that formally divided the joint property.

Connie's decision to end her marriage erupted unexpectedly over a minor household situation. Although they had been involved in conversation about the health of their relationship, they hadn't reached a decision. However, the volcano of feelings Connie had contained for a long time exploded; within a week she packed her things and left on an extended vacation. She returned in the fall, rented an apartment and moved out.

For Nancy, the process was more extended. When the relationship began to feel the strains of her making choices for herself, her teen-age children developed exceptionally difficult problems. For a full two years she was immersed in seeing them through tough times. At the end of that period, her son required extended medical care and her daughter moved to be on her own. She and her husband reached a crisis point around their son's health. After years of tension, she finally said, "I can't take it any more." She and her son moved to a holistic health center as an interim arrangement. After three months, they were asked to leave because the center felt she needed to make a more considered, permanent decision.





They moved to the Boston area in 1980. Her divorce was finalized three years later.

## **FINDINGS**

Comparing and contrasting the stories of the ten women in the project reveals several issues of note.

1. Almost without exception, the women acknowledged that the choice they made to enter religious life or to marry was heavily influenced by their families' expectations of them. It would be more accurate to say they accepted a socially sanctioned role for themselves rather than designate the decision as a true "choice." With few alternative models for their lives, little independent experience and no compelling reason to resist the conclusions of those who were deemed trustworthy, the women in this study moved along a path mapped out for them by the social forces of their particular context. Their acceptance was like that of the vast majority of their peers; few young women of their generation and their situations could imagine doing something else.

2. Although several women reported misgivings early in their choices, none knew how to evaluate those feelings. The meaning of the discomfort would become apparent only after a considerable lapse of time and much reflection and personal struggle.

3. In both groups of women, the time between the first formulation of the question about the suitability of their life's choice and the decision to reverse their choice was at minimum two years, but more commonly a decade or more. Women



in religious life tended to report this period of their life in more detail than formerly married women. There are several factors that account for the difference. Women in religious life were encouraged even before Vatican II to attend to their interior life through regular times of reflection and retreat. The reforms of Vatican II strengthened this aspect of life in orders and for many, the growing intensity of personal questions coincided with new opportunities to consider their meaning. Women in orders received institutional support for the process that would yield an extensive narrative about their internal dialogue.

Women in marriages, however, lacked this kind of consistent support and encouragement. Any natural inclinations to reflection were overwhelmed by other life concerns; particularly the needs of a growing family. It was only after their children were past the early years of dependency that women in marriages had an opportunity to attend to questions about their needs and desires. However, once they began to question their situations, the decision to make changes gathered momentum more rapidly than for women in religious life. By the time women in marriages considered a change, models had emerged out of the tumult of the 60's of alternative possibilities for them to consider.

4. The two groups were different in the way they utilized connection/disconnection in their process. Several women in orders spoke of their need to differentiate themselves from the community, that they felt embedded in a collective identity that did not fully recognize their unique gifts and needs. They needed to move away from connection. For women with families, isolation from



connection with other adults and with the outside world propelled them toward attachment to a community--church, school, support group, a community organization. Their growing self-awareness needed the confirmation and encouragement of other people who recognized their latent gifts and needs.

5. Many of the women identified specific experiences that gave their questions clarity and focus. In retrospect these events signaled a shift in perspective for the women. It was at that point that they began to entertain the possibility of making a change whereas formerly the question was unthinkable. The first step in becoming an agent of change is to imagine something else is possible.

6. It is not surprising that "spirituality" meant different things to the ten women of the sample. Nor is it surprising that each woman reported a variety of practices and activities that she associated with the label "spiritual." There was some uniformity among the reports of the Roman Catholic women since they all experienced the same clearly defined tradition. The Protestant women, on the other hand, did not have a common tradition, nor did their families invest so thoroughly in their denomination and its practices.

Almost all the women spoke of their affiliation with the church as the first category of spirituality. Their earliest relationship to the church was formal, through worship and other rituals taught by the church. Attendance at worship and disciplines of prayer were used as indicators of the health of the relationship. Women in religious life spoke of the expressions of piety that were a routine part of their early life--daily family prayers, attendance at Mass, observance of holy days







and the season of Lent. Each of them described a steady transformation of this relationship away from diligent observance of prescribed forms to a present commitment to participate only in ways that are personally meaningful. None now attend Mass routinely, nor do they feel compelled by duty or necessity to affiliate with a parish in an active way. The Protestant women of this sample, because they do not have a common religious heritage, reported several patterns of affiliation and participation with a community of faith. Like their counterparts, they currently choose to participate in worship and other activities when those activities correspond to their sense of integrity.

The second relationship that spirituality signifies is a relationship to God. As the women grew in self-awareness and in experience, they felt that relationship shift. Some discovered a characteristic of God that had, up to that point, been unrecognized. For several, perceiving a more compassionate aspect of God than they had formerly perceived was essential before they could consider reviewing their life commitment. For others, "God" is no longer defined as a person but rather as a force for good; dialogue is not the appropriate way to speak of the relationship they have with God. Instead the women talk of their efforts to understand the dynamics that accomplish the purposes of God and their commitment to cooperate with those forces.

Finally, spirituality was sometimes used to designate an aspect of a woman's relationship to a community. In contrast to their relationship to the church as an identifiable community of faith, women spoke of their commitment to a specific



group of people who were important to one another apart from religious identification. Women's spiritual selves were evoked and nurtured by a variety of groups that shared their questions and values.

7. Because in recent years Roman Catholic spiritual formation has emphasized the connection between personal growth and spirituality, the Roman Catholic women in this study were more comfortable speaking about their spirituality in terms of personal insight and development than their Protestant counterparts. For the formerly married women, personal growth was understood as a by-product of spiritual practices, not as a process intimately related to their spiritual life.

8. The question of economic security was rarely addressed directly. In the conversations, several of the women alluded to economic considerations as a part of their ongoing debate, but in no case did anyone identify economic hardship as a serious barrier to re-considering their life choice. Every woman I interviewed had some resources for establishing a new life whether those resources were in the form of education and work experience as in the case of the women who left religious orders or in the form of family resources from inherited wealth or accumulated financial resources from a marriage. In this respect the sample is biased for many women face severe economic dislocation if they choose to strike out on their own. Although most spoke of the anxiety of the first months of their new life, all have found ways to support themselves adequately for the present. For more than half of the group, however, retirement looms as a heavy cloud on the horizon. Their



current earning capacity will not necessarily provide a comfortable living once they end their days of employment.

9. For the women in this study, the decision to leave an order or a marriage was not predicated on the existence of an alternative situation to the one they were leaving. Although three of the ten women eventually married, none knew their future partner at the time of the decision to make a change. Surprisingly, only three of the ten were employed when they decided to leave. In spite of the uncertainty of the future, women decided to leave a situation of relative security. They did so for several reasons. First, they were convinced their health--physical, emotional and spiritual--depended on ending the relationship to the order or to their marriage. Secondly, they had resources, just enough to reassure their emerging sense of self confidence that they would be able to find a way to survive the dislocation a decision to leave represented.

10. As women discussed the factors involved in making their decision, only four identified dreams or images as helpful resources in the process. In those cases, the women gained insight about their situation, insight that would have otherwise been delayed or overlooked. The information they gleaned from those experiences, when combined with other factors, contributed to their conviction they were traveling in the right direction.

In the next four chapters, I will consider the material from the interviews as it contributes to understanding the experience of the women as emergence-y. I want to take care to say the conclusions are appropriate for a small segment of the





population. The sample I selected is homogeneous enough to propose a general description of the experience of the women included, but in no way could this study be used to understand the experience of women who are from a different social location. However, for the women in this sample, and for women who come from similar circumstances and have considered similar decisions, I believe the emergence of self-understanding and self-appreciation over time is a significant component of the emergence-y that confronts women with the need for change.



## CHAPTER V

*i found god in myself  
and i loved her  
i loved her fiercely*

Ntozake Shange

### EMERGENCE-Y AS LIBERATION

At the outset of this project, I made several assumptions about the relationship between the kind of decisions I was investigating and the idea of liberation. While those assumptions were not altogether false, after hearing the stories of the women I interviewed and further reflection on my own process, I recognized I needed to enrich my concept of liberation to accommodate what I learned from this project.

Because I had been schooled in a political perspective of liberation and heavily influenced by the experience of Third World liberation movements, my concept of liberation relied on the models that had their origins in the work of Paulo Freire.

In those models, liberation is a community process of action/reflection (concientizacion) that brings to conscious awareness the full reality of an oppressive situation. The outcome of the process is twofold: 1) By uncovering power relationships that are not immediately apparent, the process enables individuals to



claim their rightful sense of value and worth as human beings or, as Freire would say, to recognize themselves as Subjects;<sup>1</sup> and 2) As individuals recognize and accept the new perception of themselves, they become empowered separately and in community, to become agents in shaping their own destinies.<sup>2</sup>

Early in the process of concientizacion an individual must be able to accept the assumption that reality, meaning culture and social relationships, is constructed by human choice and intentions and changes in reality are made by human decision and effort. Before critical consciousness is possible, an individual must relinquish patterns of belief that support the idea that social relationships are ordained, a part of the "given" of the world since the beginning of time. For many religious traditions, the notion that humans rather than "God," "the gods" or "Fate" are responsible for the way reality functions is antithetical to the foundations of those belief systems. A precondition for "liberation" is a willingness to examine critically what many individuals have regarded as unquestioned and unquestionable. Most Christian traditions have, as a basic tenet, a doctrine of creation that ascribes sovereignty over both natural and social orders to God. For many individuals, whose socialization included association with a Christian tradition, a barrier to full participation in the liberation process, as Freirians understands it, is the need to re-

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<sup>1</sup>Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970) p. 20. The translator's note reads: "The term 'Subjects' denotes those who know and act, in contrast to 'objects,' which are known and acted upon."

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 52.





interpret a fundamental component of their faith.

Freire's theoretical model suggest a rather straightforward movement of an individual from developing a critical awareness of social reality to accepting responsibility for participating in constructing reality to taking action, individually and collectively, to transform social conditions so that the humanity of all persons is recognized and supported. In application, the process is much more complicated. In few cases are individuals able to act directly on the conclusions they draw, whether we consider Third World movements or folk in middle America caught in an economic system that has them ensnared in work that is unsatisfying and contrary to some of their values. The simplicity of the theory does not take into account the role attachment has in making a decision to take action to make changes in a real life situation.

Before an individual can decide to make a pro-active response on behalf of her/his own liberation or the liberation of others, s/he has to consider the relative importance of her/his competing allegiances. I suspect that the level of critical consciousness as well as agency is affected by an individual's perceptions and choices about her/his attachments and affiliations. Attachments that must be negotiated and assigned priority include personal relationships with family and friends as well as an individual's commitment to values and ideas or affiliation with groups that reflect what an individual believes about her/his identity. The liberation process, as described by Freire and his followers, is accurate, but limited. It traces the cognitive path that the liberation process follows, but does not fully



appreciate or account for the emotional, affective component involved in an individual's decision to become an agent for change.

When I compared the information from the women's stories with the liberation model based on Freire's work, there was not an obvious fit between them. The level and type of analysis that preceded their decision increased the women's self-awareness, but generally, they did not report the kind of reflections on social structures or social relationships that are a part of concientizacion. Secondly, most often, the motivation for the decision was made by themselves as individuals, for themselves as individuals. The women I interviewed exercised agency, but the decision they made was not done in the name of "liberation" or in conscious concert with other women or as a blow to oppressive social structures.

Although I had hoped to find a correspondence between the outline of the stories of the women I interviewed and the liberation process, I had to look elsewhere for a theoretical framework that would help understand the stories as liberation narratives.

I consulted Katie Cannon's model, "The Dance of Redemption" (Appendix A) as an alternative and more complex description of how the liberation process takes place. Based on the work of Beverly Harrison,<sup>3</sup> "The Dance of Redemption" is clear about the necessity to analyze the matrix of social relationships, the history of their development and the ideas that undergird them as critical first steps in

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<sup>3</sup>Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Theological Reflection in the Struggle for Liberation" in Making The Connections edited by Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) pp. 235-263.



becoming a responsible and accountable agent of change. Further, Cannon's work takes seriously the role theology plays in legitimating oppressive structures and relationships, but at the same time recognizes theology as a potential resource for liberation if appropriated in different ways. "The Dance of Redemption" differs significantly from the simpler liberation model in giving appropriate priority to the role of the community in both action and reflection phases of the process. Implicitly, the Dance recognizes the importance of attachment in the movement for social change. Additionally, it acknowledges how important dialogue is in the search for clarity and in the process of deciding what action is most appropriate in a specific context.

When I compared the stories of the women I interviewed with the process described in "The Dance of Redemption," I found there was not sufficient correspondence between them to use Cannon's model to analyze the experience of the women. Because many of the women in the study spent years considering their decisions, it was difficult to see how their experience fit into the action/reflection dynamic that undergirds Cannon's approach.

After much thought, it became clear that the decision-making process that this study examines is a necessary step that precedes the self-conscious cycle of praxis outlined in "The Dance of Redemption." Elements that are integral to that model --an awareness of one's location within an oppressive system, a conscious desire to confront the forces of oppression with the aim of dismantling them, the recognition and association with others who share perceptions and goals -- are







missing from the accounts of the women I interviewed. Some of the women, since the time of their emergence-y, have elected to move into a more self-conscious participation in social change, but that choice does not follow automatically from a life-changing experience such as those reported by the women.

The findings of this study underscore how difficult it is for women and others in a subordinate position to reach a level of awareness that conveys the "truth" of oppressive circumstances. From the stories of the women, we can illustrate several reasons why this is so.

Distress is often the motivation that stimulates change. Physical pain is the most obvious example of a condition that moves people, but emotional distress is a powerful motivator as well. However, the recognition of pain and distress can be blocked from consciousness in many ways.

Humans generally have a remarkable ability to ignore pain sensations when there are compelling reasons to do so. There are stories of athletes, for example, who override the pain of an injury in order to complete a game. Women are taught techniques of dissociation to relieve the intensity of pain during childbirth. Women under patriarchy are socialized to discount their feelings of distress to accommodate the needs of another person or of a group they are affiliated with in a primary way. The more successfully they have been socialized to accept subordinate status, the more they are inclined to ignore or minimize their own needs and desires. The women of this study absorbed this perspective from their families of origin so their learned response to personal distress was to ignore it in favor of the greater good.



Recognition of distress is also difficult in a situation where tension is so pervasive in daily life its presence is considered "normal." In those instances, distress is perceived when it is absent. Unless an individual has some other experience that will offer an alternative way to evaluate "normal," there is a powerful inclination on the part of an individual to replicate what is familiar in subsequent human relationships. Several of the women in this study were unable to assess accurately how painful their ordinary circumstances were until they had an experience of something different. For several that meant experiencing a romantic attachment that revealed the poverty of their primary relationship. For others it meant a separation from a distressing work or living situation to one where they experienced affirmation and satisfaction.

Finally, dissociation from pain and distress is a consequence of the trauma of sexual, physical or emotional abuse. In such circumstances, children protect their psyches from destruction with the defense of dissociation. As adults, they may continue to protect themselves with the same method. Women especially, because they suffer abuse disproportionately, do not always register pain they should be experiencing. As a consequence, it is difficult for them to begin to consider making changes.

When the level of distress is acknowledged, a woman still may not be ready to address the issue directly. Before she can develop plans to deal with her pain, she has to be able to identify the source of her suffering accurately. Women in patriarchy have been conditioned to locate responsibility in ways that protect the



status quo. In my story and in the stories I heard, the most frequent impulse was to blame the self for any difficulties a woman may have perceived. It is a common response in a society filled with women who are parentified children (children who were asked to assume responsibility for others, usually siblings, beyond their emotional and developmental capacities). In this study, all but one of the women were eldest daughters, those most at risk for becoming parentified. It is not surprising they first looked to themselves as the source of their problems. This is one of the most difficult cycles of doubt to interrupt. Another standard of evaluation or a source that confirms her perceptions is necessary for a woman to break out of a debilitating and discouraging internal debate.

This discussion emphasizes how critical participation in a community is for a woman to recognize and appreciate her situation. The accuracy of a woman's assessment of distress depends on sources of confirmation beyond her immediate circumstances. She needs to have experienced alternatives in order to have a basis for comparison or she needs to be affiliated with others who can provide her with another perspective. Consciousness-raising groups served this need and many women were helped to see their situation more accurately through them.

But for those women like the women I interviewed who, for one reason or another, did not participate in that kind of process, coming to awareness was a long and arduous undertaking. Their progress was delayed, in some cases, by association with others who, consciously or unconsciously, reinforced the socialization of the dominant culture.







While the process of becoming self-aware is assisted in important ways by dialogue with others who are seeking clarity, it is important to note that self-awareness does not depend entirely on a supportive and critical community. The findings of this study suggest there is an internal impulse toward self-awareness and self-appreciation that is active in the lives of many women. To be sure, that impulse can be thwarted, even destroyed in extreme circumstances, but it can also be cultivated and nurtured. In the stories of the women in this study, that impulse worked through many kinds of circumstances until it was noticed as a force to be taken seriously. Whether the impulse is stimulated and supported by a community of women or whether it works quietly but surely within an individual woman, I believe it is a power that will find a way to erupt into circumstances of distress and defeat to encourage movement toward change.

By asking the women in this project to describe their personal decision-making process, I invited stories that focused on the individual as the protagonist and apologist of the narrative. The majority of the women, therefore, talked about their experience in personal terms, focusing on how they coped with painful events and personal disappointments. With the exception of three of the subjects, the women of this study rarely spoke about political or social concerns. As public events made an impact on their personal lives, those events were discussed.

Only three of the women were comfortable designating themselves as feminists; two others accepted the term with qualifications. Perhaps these women, if asked directly, would be able to discuss their stories with an emphasis on social



analysis. However, under the circumstances that I created, none of the women spoke about experience or situation in abstract terms; their stories focused on the concrete circumstances of their lives. None of the group spontaneously used the term "liberation" to describe the process she had experienced as she struggled to make a decision about the course of her life.<sup>4</sup>

I believe the decisions the women and I made undermine the authority of patriarchy and our action contributes to weakening its hold on other women, but our decisions were different than the term "liberation" might imply. After considering the stories of the women and reflecting again on my process, I concluded I needed to make one final adjustment in conceptualizing "liberation" for this study.

When I thought about how to define the group of women I wanted to interview, I focused on a point of decision (a choice to leave a marriage or a religious order) as the way to designate the particular group of women in the study. However, "decision" took on more importance than the material warranted. Because leaving a marriage or an order is a major decision, I assumed that the landmark designated "decision" would be a major feature on the internal maps of the women I interviewed. It was easy to take the next step, thinking about "before" and "after" as though the decision was the most important part of their identities. Fortunately, their stories did not support such a simplistic conception of liberation,

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<sup>4</sup>In this they displayed intuitive wisdom that I realized later. "Consciousness-raising" is not an accurate label either since most of the women were isolated in their struggle.





as though it were a single historical event, never to be repeated. Their decision did not mark a new direction or a new identity so much as it revealed the culmination of an emerging reality. By focusing on the decision, I implied liberation was an either/or category, demonstrating the residual power of patriarchy. Liberation is not an absolute category.<sup>5</sup> We do better by thinking of it in comparative terms--I have more freedom today than I did five years ago and I expect to increase my options even more in the next two years. Like life, it is more important to be on the right road than to have arrived at a destination.

Despite the fact that the women of this study did not use "liberation" or

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<sup>5</sup>As I was preparing this portion of the paper, I recalled a memory that I haven't thought about in years. The emotions attached to the memory are still powerful. When my daughter was 3 months old, I decided to take her with me to a 3-day meeting in another city. She was nursing at the time and did not need formula so was a very transportable child. She was a genial baby, not fussy or irritable, so the only time her presence was disruptive was the occasion when someone noticed she was present and wanted to play with her. I was discreet about her feeding times, excusing myself if necessary and retiring to a quiet place. On one of these occasions I was rudely interrupted by a man who was the editor of the newsletter of the organization. He walked up to me and without so much as a greeting, demanded, "Do you consider yourself liberated?" I still remember the surge of emotions--anger that this man felt empowered to intrude so abruptly and discourteously, anger that he felt entitled to ask a question of such import of a relative stranger without preface and without an opportunity for elaboration or discussion, anger that he assumed nursing a baby compromised any answer I might give him, anger that he gave me no room to define for myself the category "liberation". Finally, I felt confused because I had been thinking of myself as a contributing member of the meeting, not primarily as a nursing mother. I would have liked to speak to this man about some of the important issues we were considering; I certainly didn't want to appear in the newsletter as a human interest aside. I was speechless.

Now I'm embarrassed that I could so easily have made a similar kind of assumption. "Liberation" as a category can be used as a weapon; it is not surprising some women avoid attaching it to themselves or others.





"feminist" spontaneously, I believe the stories of emerging self-awareness, emerging self-appreciation, emerging self-confidence that I heard from the ten women are accounts of the process of liberation. While their experience is not "normative" their process is not uncommon. Attending to the process they experienced will yield information that will be helpful for other women.

An important question I considered as I reviewed the material was, "What accounts for the extended period of time it takes for a woman to arrive at a decision?" From the time the first nudges of dissatisfaction occurred to the time a woman came to a decision to leave, a thorough debate was conducted. On average, five years elapsed as a woman weighed the consequences of changing as well as the consequences of not changing.

I have, in this chapter, cited several issues that contribute to extending the internal struggle. Most notable are women's difficulties acknowledging distress and then correctly identifying its source.

In addition, the stories reveal that women are responsive to other factors that postpone or suspend a decision to change their life commitment. In the preceding chapter, three common themes emerged. First and foremost, women take seriously their relationships and responsibilities. The married women considered their children and their needs as they weighed the decision. For women in religious life, the commitment was less focused, but nevertheless a factor. Their responsibilities in the work they did, most often teaching, were mentioned. More often cited was reluctance to abandon the community of women that had



become a second family. Even those who had experienced difficulty with particular relationships in the community, the community (not the order) had become part of their identity and it was hard to consider separating from it. Some women understood "community" as an ideal as well as its actual manifestation; coming to terms with the loss of that ideal was part of their consideration.

A second factor that delayed a decision was the potential loss of benefits the women received in their situation. One of the losses was intangible and difficult to assess--even with the difficulties the women were experiencing, being a wife or being a sister provided a place for them in society. The second loss, economic security, was easier to recognize, but no less difficult to contemplate. Women in religious orders may have taken a vow of poverty and consequently had a minimum standard of living, but so long as they were part of the order, they had the security of the community's economic support. When they separated from their orders, they were confronted by an economic system that was not hospitable to women at mid-life whose employment record was as varied as theirs were. Although they contributed to the order's resources during their years of work, they received no settlement for retirement purposes. Upon leaving they were given a small lump sum contribution, barely sufficient for a month's living expenses. The women I interviewed who left marriages were somewhat atypical in that three of the five had significant family resources that allowed them more latitude to consider leaving a marriage than women from other classes. The other two received settlements that provided adequate support for a time following separation. None had sole



responsibility for children's college expenses or support. The sample did not include women who faced major economic dislocation as a consequence of leaving a marriage and in that regard it is a biased sample.

Finally, the women in this study wrestled with issues of shame and guilt associated with failing to keep a promise they made before God and before their families.

### **Model of Emergence-y**

As discussed in the preceding chapter, while the factors just cited delayed a decision, at the same time there was another powerful process underway for most of the women in the study. When this process reached a critical point, the debate reached its conclusion and the decision to separate was completed. The gradual emergence of self-awareness at some point precipitated an emergence-y.

Emergence-y is a messy process. Reducing it to a simple scheme risks eliminating important components and trivializing its import and impact on individuals. Having named it as a process, however, means there must be identifiable characteristics that distinguish it as an entity. Stated in its most cogent form, emergence-y is a process of growing self-awareness that, as it develops, changes the relative importance of some personal values at the same time it responds to changing conditions of an individual woman's life. For the women of this study, the process has had the effect of denying authority to some aspects of patriarchy, allowing the women to continue to grow in self-affirmation. In the







course of the changing self-awareness, the women were challenged to make a decision that in its starkness revealed how much had changed.

I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann for a set of categories that I think are useful in constructing a conceptual framework for the process we have been considering.<sup>6</sup> I propose we think about emergence-y in terms of orientation, disorientation and reorientation.

In the women's stories, as they talked about their early life and the way they moved from childhood to young adulthood and into their first major life decision, there was a sense of givenness about their situations. Like all of us, they absorbed the values and beliefs of their families and communities in order to orient themselves in a world that, without this framework of meaning, would overwhelm them. This received structure formed them, led them to expect certain things, and indicated what was worthy of reward and what deserved punishment. From this orientation, they made a decision about the course of their lives. The decisions they made were considered "good." They were led to expect appropriate rewards.

Soon, however, there were indications that there was not an absolute correspondence between what had been given them and what they experienced.

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<sup>6</sup>In The Message of the Psalms (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), Walter Brueggemann outlines a classification of the Psalms that makes their contemporary application more apparent. He uses the terms orientation, disorientation and reorientation to describe human situations that evoke a response to God's activity in community life. He intends the use of these categories as a means of correlating the human situation that generated particular psalms with contemporary life. Their use in this paper is not intended to refer to their original function.



There were little things, small disappointments and minor questions, not enough to be disturbed but enough to wonder occasionally. Because they were women and the given orientation of patriarchy subordinated women as well as instilled a rationale for subordination, they were reluctant to do more than ask themselves if they could be mistaken in their perceptions or their understanding. The scheme seemed to be working for some people so they were encouraged to try to fit themselves into "the way things were."

The feeling of dis-ease, of disorientation, of not quite fitting and not understanding why, is a subtheme of many women's lives. It isn't because they have become confused or misunderstood the structure and rules of the given orientation; they are disoriented because the structure doesn't work for them and was not intended to work for them. The more they try to mold themselves to what they believe they need to be to fit, the more "crazy" they feel because their experience tells them how impossible the task is. I believe it was, and still may be, a common experience for a woman to live with a belief in the rightness of the structure of orientation that was given to her and, at the same time, to live with a confused sense of disorientation that is a product of her experience and her perceptions. Her disorientation is a consequence of her awareness; if she felt completely oriented it would be a signal that she had suppressed a significant aspect of herself.

Emergence coincides with the growing recognition of disorientation. As the word suggests, disorientation is a time of anguish and confusion. It is a time of lament, a time to ask, "Why have I been deceived?" As disorientation increases in





scope and intensity, one's interior focus shifts more and more to the distress, trying to patch meaning from the growing confusion. Jane, describing how useful journaling was to her during the time she was considering what she needed to do, talked about how she was feeling then: "That was very helpful during this decision-making time, because at times I felt just so confused, lost, didn't know where I was going. Just getting it out on paper helped to clarify (what was going on)."

Although I believe the categories can represent sequential experiences, I want to emphasize that the feelings of orientation and disorientation may be simultaneous experiences for many women. Like many oppressed people, women who are aware and attentive to the context they inhabit and their own inner reality know there are two worlds they must navigate at the same time. Each has its own requirements and processes. The first is the world of the dominant system that organizes public life and the structures of the institutions women rely on for security and a place in society. The second is the interior world of each person that registers the personal cost of participating in the dominant system. The danger to victims of oppression is the temptation to abandon the truth of the interior world.<sup>7</sup> Survival depends on an individual's capacity to sustain the tension of co-existence

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<sup>7</sup>Elaine Scary, in her book The Body in Pain (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), outlines how torture, the most extreme application of pain, functions to obliterate the inner world of victims of political oppression. Her thesis, I believe, has a wider application. She demonstrates how pain destroys an individual's inner world, making that person vulnerable to accepting the structure of the world of the oppressor. It is an important perspective in understanding the function of physical and sexual abuse of children and other relatively powerless individuals.





until such time the tension can be resolved in favor of living from the values and needs of the individual. Many do not survive, psychically; their personal resources are overwhelmed by the relentless grinding reality of the external world and the corresponding internalized forces that have been imposed upon them.

Orientation offers a settled, accepted perspective, one that explains the world in a comprehensive way. It is seductive in its promise of security. Disorientation is unsettling, distressing.<sup>8</sup> In the group I interviewed, women described their feelings of "restlessness," of discomfort, of something "not right." They were, I believe, experiencing the effects of disorientation, a sense that orientation was failing them. As they were discovering the limitations of orientation, they were also sensing something new about themselves that was emerging. It was difficult for the women to be specific in their description of the new reality although some could identify a time when the presence of the new life became manifest. Several felt a surge of energy and awareness as they participated whole-heartedly in an opportunity for learning.

The period that I examined in the lives of the women in this study, the

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<sup>8</sup>In The Feminine Face of God, p.18 (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), the authors Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins summarize their findings: "Toni's words suggest another reason why it is so difficult for women to trust their own truth and why it has taken us so long to begin our search for spiritual authenticity: We might have to let go of certain 'authoritative truths' which, even if we cannot make them fit with our experience have nevertheless given us a sense of security. . . What we learned over the past four years is that stripping away the layer of encultured patriarchal values and beliefs is a profoundly disruptive process. One reason for this is that when we let go of authoritative truths that have made us feel secure in the past, what arises in their place is great uncertainty."



extended process of reaching a decision about their life course, was the time women lived in the tension between orientation and disorientation.<sup>9</sup> When the decision was made, it represented an act of courage on the part of the women. The decision resolved the tension only in part, because the women still had to live within the confines of a social order organized by the dominant ideology. For example, they would have to cope with economic realities that were shaped by the requirements of orientation. But, the decision represented a loosening of the hold orientation had as the way to provide meaning to life. The decision was a declaration that orientation was found wanting.

The conclusion women reached was a combination of identifying specific ways in which orientation was harmful, both to themselves and others, and of recognizing something new was emerging in themselves that required a change to continue to grow. The decision was an courageous step into the unknown, an affirmation of the truth of disorientation. The decision declared their willingness to risk having to cope with chaos rather than to stay in a place of relative security whose price was escalating internal tension and stress. In no case in this study did women exchange one orientation for another. There was nothing settled about the reality they chose to enter.

In the lives of the women I interviewed, reorientation is not the second half of a pair of bookends that mark the outer limits of uncertainty and questions. It

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<sup>9</sup>Thomas Berry, in The Feminine Face of God (p. 179), said, "It is as if we are between stories. The old story about who we are and how to live doesn't work anymore and we don't know what the new story is."





is not a reprise of orientation. It is, genuinely, a new thing. It is unexplored territory, not only for themselves, but for women generally. In spite of all the exploration and discussion about the new land that is opening up for habitation, there is precious little certainty about how new life will take shape. The stories of these women reminded me again that we are making the road as we go.

What, then, is reorientation? Women who have experienced emergence-y have said, in one way or another, that they cannot trust all that was given to them from the past. They are like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz who, after a quick survey of the new place she discovers upon awaking, knows she isn't in Kansas. They are challenged to explore the new place, trusting their own instincts and experiences to let them know what is safe and what is not and relying on their strengths and abilities to solve the inevitable problems they will encounter. Reorientation is turning to an inner gyroscope as the source of information about the meaning and value of the new experiences in this new territory. It is realizing what is "given" has been made up by somebody and therefore subject to re-evaluation and reconstruction if necessary. It is making the transition from being a child of God to an adult of God, of taking life in one's own hands.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> From The Feminine Face of God (p.48), "What (one leaves) is a consciousness that once felt secure, had categories to fit things into, and knew who it was, when it was going, and why. And what replaces this sureness is 'not knowing.' And openness. And something unspeakably, and almost unbearably, new."





## CHAPTER VI

*Women's spiritual quest concerns  
a woman's awakening to the  
depths of her soul and her position  
in the universe.*

Carol P. Christ

Diving Deep and Surfacing

### EMERGENCE-Y AS SPIRITUALITY

The second issue that inspired this project was the question how a woman's spirituality was related to the process of emergence-y. In my case, in addition to the other factors that supported me as I worked through my decision, my spiritual life was an important resource during that time. Was that so for others? If so, how was it made manifest?

As I invited women to participate in the study, I included in my description a brief statement that spirituality was an important part of the study, especially as it related to their decision. From the beginning, the women who spoke to me expected to discuss their spiritual life as they understood it. As I indicated earlier, among the many women approached to participate in the study, only one said there had been no relationship between her decision and her spirituality. All the women who agreed to participate were prepared to talk about their spirituality as well as their decision. Because I framed the invitation the way I did, the sample included only women for whom this connection was comfortable. The sample in no way



represents women generally because even within the parameters I set forth, the choice of subjects was not random. Nevertheless, the sample is useful to explore the question for women affiliated with churches. These women are more likely to rely on the resources of churches in times of personal crisis than the general population and are also more likely to provide resources for others in churches.

Spirituality is an elusive concept. Since it is a noun, we expect it to name and define an entity that has a recognizable shape and identifiable qualities. But spirituality is much like the terms "Beauty" and "Good." Its pure form is never realized in our imperfect world and I'm not sure we would recognize it if we encountered it.

We can speak of it as an individual's relationship to God, but since there is not a uniform conception of God, there is not a common base for discourse about spirituality. "God" is not a constant, even in an individual's life, for as one learns more about oneself, the world, and God, one's conception of God changes. Additionally, each person emphasizes a different aspect of their personality at different times as the most important characteristic in relationship. As an individual's self understanding changes, a different aspect of God is approached or welcomed into conversation.

Sometimes an individual's conception of God stands in the way of fully recognizing all that spirituality might include. A broader definition--spirituality is one's relationship to the sacred--would make it possible to examine elements in a person's life that might be named "spiritual" by an observer, but not identified as





such by the subject. Creative endeavors such as music, writing or visual art reveal to others important values and convictions held by an individual. Examples of self-expression may be identified as spiritual in that they indicate the highest aspirations of the artist.

Spirituality connotes a relationship and so it is similar to the term "function" in calculus. It is impossible to say it is this and not that. Like simultaneous equations in algebra, which have many potential solutions, some of them real numbers and some of them unreal numbers, there is not a single "right" way to describe spirituality. It is elusive because it is complicated. It is a concept that has an interior reality for individuals and a collective reality for religious communities, but it is not directly observable in and of itself. Its effects can be seen in our everyday world in the choices individuals and communities make. It is an entity that can fill and enliven a variety of forms and spaces.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that each religious tradition, including each form of Christianity, has developed a style of spirituality that helps members identify themselves as part of a particular faith community. Even in a sample as small as mine and as homogeneous as it is in many respects, there are several clear patterns of spirituality related to specific traditions the women have experienced. Each religious community, through the practices and disciplines, rituals and liturgies that developed out of its particular history, fosters a unique spirituality. As individuals grow into a tradition, the forms provide an entree into a relationship with God and shape an individual's expectations about that



relationship. The particular practices of a tradition reflect and support the structure of meaning that community has adopted to understand the world and their place in it. Through participation in the forms, an individual may acquire a vocabulary that enables that person to speak within a community about matters of great import and profundity.

Spirituality, one's relationship to God, generates personal power. To feel a genuine connection to what one regards as most holy is to feel a deep connection to the forces of creation and the universe. A significant relationship to God, however God is defined, is a source of strength and confidence for an individual. The danger, of course, is that an individual will become attached, sometimes unconsciously, to an aspect of power and authority that leads to beliefs and behaviors that can wreak havoc in the world. The only sure guard against anti-social conclusions about the meaning of one's perceived connections to the holy is to uphold the necessity of constant and forthright dialogue within a community about ultimate matters. It is for this reason communities of faith have developed spiritual practices that they have found reliable as guides for authentic spirituality. It isn't just that the methods have yielded a genuine relationship with God; they also provide standards that protect the community from harmful or dangerous claims.

However, because spirituality is an experience that can be molded and shaped and because it is a source of power, care must be taken that the forms we use serve us well.



Aside from the difficulty of confining spirituality to a specific definition, I had a second reason for refraining from describing the phenomenon with too much specificity. For centuries, our religious traditions have been permeated with the ideology of patriarchy. As the various Christian traditions developed, they absorbed and expressed aspects of that ideology. Almost no form of spiritual discipline of Western civilization avoids reinforcing the subordination of women or perpetuating the dualism of body/spirit or material/spiritual. It is legitimate, I think, to question whether the traditional forms of spiritual practice serve women well or provide a complete repertoire of authentic spirituality to choose from. It is from this position of skepticism I wanted to conduct this inquiry.<sup>1</sup>

In the interviews I asked each woman to talk about her spiritual life, letting her define what that meant for her. If she did not talk about her spirituality in relation to her decision process, I followed up with a specific question to elicit that information. I wanted to hear what each woman would identify as her spiritual practices and their role in shaping her life decisions. In addition, I listened for other ways the trail of spirituality might be recognized. I sought answers to the questions "What is refreshing and renewing for you? What is your source of energy? Do you find images or metaphors useful?" If my assumptions are

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<sup>1</sup>From the recent book The Feminine Face of God, we find a similar conclusion: "Despite our many years of spiritual practice and extensive reading in various traditions we know almost nothing about how women develop spiritually...women on spiritual paths today must look beyond models of the past for inspiration." Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, The Feminine Face of God (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 7.





accurate, that traditional spiritual practices are not well suited for women's growth and development, I wanted to identify alternative ways women make connections to the sacred.

### **Leaving the Path**

I was not surprised to hear how the women who had been part of religious orders had been formed from early life by the practices of the Roman Catholic church. Some recalled daily prayer at meals and nightly recitations of the rosary, daily Mass as part of their parochial school education and the disciplines associated with the season of Lent. As one woman described the importance of religious observance for her family, "It was part of the fabric of our lives."

When they entered the orders, they expected each day would include times of prayer. They also expected to participate, at regular intervals, in retreats. As young women, their spiritual lives had a prescribed order that was shared by the whole community.

As religious communities proceeded through the renewal following Vatican II, monolithic structures gave way to a variety of forms. Prescriptions were less and less evident as the women in orders experimented with new ways of nurturing their relationship to God. Sue described that time for her community: "Like everything else (our spiritual life) was changing and evolving. Already by the '70's the idea of going to daily Mass was no longer the case. That was a tension. The concept of shared living where we shared our lives was part of our spirituality. I think that certainly continued. It varied from place to place depending on the numbers living



together. It could be anything from Biblical readings of the day to something that someone found that was inspirational. It was creating for ourselves rather than being dependent on the appointed priest to give us life. We knew we had it anyway."

Their spiritual experiences of women in religious life were less and less mediated and more and more direct. They assumed more responsibility for giving shape to the practices of the community and choosing how they, as individuals, would conduct their prayer life. The character of retreats changed--there were more choices about structure and content and women began leading retreats for their orders and for others. The practice of spiritual direction flourished. As religious orders set aside their highly organized lives in favor of participating more directly in the life of the world, there was an explosion of energy and an enthusiasm for spiritual growth. Formation lost the connotation of being a time to shape and mold young women to the identity of the order and became a time of discernment of an individual's interior reality.

In many respects the upheaval of religious life was an ideal time for young women who wanted to take their personal spiritual life seriously. The orders gave over their role of shaping to a role of supporting. The young women who entered religious life were invited to explore spirituality with encouragement and freedom that had formerly been unknown. I believe it was that kind of experience that accounts for the wealth of detail and the depth of reflection evident in the stories of the women who left religious life.





As the orientation of the past receded, during the succeeding time of disorientation and experimentation, the women were set loose from former practices and were encouraged to explore new resources and new disciplines. Bible study, intensive journaling, new liturgies and new music were all part of the mix.

Out of the tumble of experiences, a few themes emerged. Relationship to God was often transformed from a distant respectful stance toward a father image to one that became intimate and personal. As one woman said, "Jesus was the best friend I ever had." Another cited her changing perception of God as a key element in freeing her to make the decision to leave the order without shame. For her, the primary image of God went from protector to Jesus as an understanding friend.

As Audrey said eloquently, "As I got further and further away from identification with the institutional church, I'm not bound up by the old rules and expectations. I think that my experience of who God is (pause) is that the Roman, the institutional structures, the religious structures, the religious life structures are coincidental to who God is. . . . God has become a much more compassionate companion for me. And I think God delights in what I've discovered and who I've become."

Audrey's observation reveals a second, more powerful theme. In addition to having a more personal relationship to God, the women developed a more intimate relationship to themselves. Especially for the three women involved in formation direction or retreat leadership this was true. The narratives of their



middle years reveal how central this theme was for them. One said she heard clearly "God's invitation to become more and more who I am."

Jane's emerging self-relationship began in a self-conscious way at the outset of her order's renewal chapter when she realized that it would be necessary to re-examine "her inner life, her inner self" to see if she could integrate the values of religious life in a personal way. She was challenged by her training in formation to continue her self-reflection. If she was going to bring others to self-appreciation and to help them build an authentic spirituality based on celebration of their uniqueness, she would have to be ready to enter the process herself. She said of that time, " I finally began to trust myself. Up to then, I had trusted others who 'knew.' It took so long to begin living from that realization of inner self." Now, ten years later, she defines God as "mystery coming out of my own being."

As these new realities and conclusions emerged, old forms were left behind. Mary consciously let go of all spiritual practices she observed in religious life to see which of them would spontaneously return. Audrey, mid-way through the time of decision, abandoned formal prayers in favor of cultivating a personal relationship with God. By the time each of the women left religious life, they had developed a spiritual life that was their own. In addition to a personal style and schedule for prayer, they found other resources to sustain their inner life. Several rely on the natural order to restore their spirits; the ocean is a favorite place. One is renewed by affiliation and activity with others who are passionate about social justice issues. Another seeks solitude for refreshment.



It is noteworthy to mention not one of the women continues to identify strongly with the Roman Catholic church. None has openly renounced her heritage, but none has an active relationship with a parish. In some ways, they exhibit the kind of attitude toward the church that has been a characteristic of Protestant affiliation for several generations, that is, a voluntaristic approach that marks a shift in the understanding of the nature of the church. In the past, the Roman Catholic church was understood to be authoritative by virtue of its ontological nature -- it was given and established by God as part of the sacred order. Therefore, they received benefits that could not be obtained any other way when individuals participated in the church. From the Protestant Reformation emerged the competing idea that the church was a human institution whose quality and value depended on the participation of individuals. In this view, the Church was more than the sum of human contributions, but the shift in emphasis did mean individuals were more accountable for the quality of their participation. Individuals were also more responsible to assess the quality of the institution, making changes if necessary and disaffiliating if conscience demanded it. The choices of the Roman Catholic women of this study indicate that they have adopted the second view of the Church and have, thereby, denied the claim to authority the Church has made in the past. This is a profound shift in allegiance. It is remarkable that allegiance has not simply been transferred to another institution that could provide an alternative structure of meaning. Having extricated themselves from a worldview





that limited and constrained their appreciation for themselves, they are unwilling to risk close association with any institution or movement except on their own terms.

### **Different Spiritual Paths**

It has been comparatively easy to examine the stories of women who had been in religious life for themes and common threads. Although each has had a unique perspective and set of experiences, all of the women were involved in a significant way with the same institution. That feature gives a focus for comparison among them. Their spiritual lives developed in response, whether positive or negative, to similar circumstances.

There is not a comparable common experience to use as a focus for comparison among the women who left marriages. They did not share a common religious heritage apart from the elements that have entered our culture and are part of our social resources.

Their families' religious affiliations reflected the social location they occupied. A woman from the Midwest was solidly middle class and Lutheran. Another grew up in a lower middle class home that was related to a Methodist church. Two women whose families were upper middle class had religious backgrounds that included connections to Episcopal, Congregational and Unitarian congregations. The fifth woman grew up in a military family that was frequently relocated; her religious heritage includes a variety of experiences and affiliations.



The "Protestant" designation, while convenient, is too broad to be helpful in describing a climate that fosters spiritual development. The one thing that can be said, in general, is there was less intentionality about regular spiritual practices in the families of origin of the women from Protestant homes. The sample did not include Roman Catholic women who chose to leave a marriage, a category that would have yielded another mode of comparison.

It is not surprising then, that the spiritual lives of the women who left marriages had less definition than the women from religious orders. Their spiritual selves were not "cultivated" with the same intensity, either as children or as young adults, as the women who entered religious life. As a consequence, the spirituality of these women is more varied. Secondly, there is not a recognized model of spiritual life that an observer can use as baseline information. And thirdly, their spirituality may take a form that requires attentiveness and interpretation to recognize.

How did these women respond to inquiries about spirituality? For the most part, they began by outlining their formal relationship to a church and the ways in which they participated in that community of faith. These descriptions were, by and large, reports of activities and roles; only one woman spontaneously spoke of an affective experience associated with her religious past.

As one of the former nuns said, "Religion was a part of the fabric of our lives." The same could be said of the Protestant women I interviewed. However, they were mostly unconscious of the structure of meaning and values that ordered





their worlds. The Roman Catholic church and its teaching provided an explicit focus for families and individuals around which life was organized. For Protestant families, especially those who have been part of the U.S. culture for several generations, the organizing principle was less distinct. The contrast between church and culture is not so apparent for them. Because their religious identification is one of the characteristics of the dominant culture, religion is not a defining element that sets them apart in the way it does for ethnic Roman Catholic families.

Spiritual formation for many Protestants is a by-product of their participation in American culture, especially in the absence of an intentional program designed to instill explicit values. When religion provides a critique of American culture, Protestant spirituality has a distinctive shape. The example of the Amish comes to mind, as well as a number of intentional communities that have been organized to provide an alternative economic structure for their members. Otherwise, the spirituality of individual Protestants is heavily influenced by the culture generally.

One woman in the group I studied connected her spiritual growth with her participation in social justice causes. Although neither her family nor her church promoted a connection between the teachings of the church and the need to respond to social conditions, the woman used elements of her tradition to give shape to her growing conscience. Her effort was not supported by her primary relationships, her parents, her husband or her children; she was able to continue to her commitments because she found kindred spirits in the groups she joined.



If I had to explain briefly the difference between the experiences of the groups of women, it seemed that religious institutions were less central to the lives of the Protestant women's families. Because American culture has absorbed and expressed in general ways some of the Protestant tradition, there isn't a clear separation between culture and church for members of Protestant churches. The teachings of the churches are not formative because the church is relativized in society and in the lives of families who are part of the dominant community. For Roman Catholic women of the era we studied, there was something clearly defined to contend with as they moved through spiritual growth. For Protestant women, the struggle was to find something tangible in a context that had little definition. Their spiritual biographies reveal the ways women came to terms with the problem.

For the two women who have been long time members of the Episcopal church, the relationship with the church began with an affiliation that they took for granted as part of their responsibility to a growing family. Doris became involved in activities that enhanced her children's participation in the church. Those experiences in turn, led to invitations to other kinds of groups in her congregation and eventually to leadership positions. As she deepened her relationship to the church and to the community, she was encouraged to grow, to reflect on her life and to reconsider some of the conclusions she had made about herself. As her involvement in lay leadership increased, her personal growth increased. The church was a safe environment as well as a source of encouragement for her to engage in self-reflection.



For Diane, involvement in the church gave her a place of reliability and steadiness that became a reassuring factor as other parts of her life shifted and changed. She says of her early participation. "It was hard. The ritual was something I had to get used to." She was fortunate to have been in a parish that found ways to introduce variety into the structure and predictability of the worship services. Her love of the immediate was satisfied at the same time her unconscious need for structure was met.

For years, as an adult, Pat did not actively participate in a church community. Those were the days that are blank pages in her spiritual diary. It was only when she decided to go into treatment for alcoholism that she regained a sense of herself as a spiritual person. Through the Twelve Step program, she was reconnected to her spiritual roots. She has rejoined a faith community, becoming an active, contributing, much respected member.

Nancy has had the most complex spiritual journey of the five. From young adulthood, she has actively sought resources for her spiritual growth, participating in meditation disciplines for many years as well as exploring a variety of religious philosophies. Her most vivid spiritual experiences, of which there are several, were, in her words, "without benefit of church." Presently, she is only nominally affiliated with a congregation; her spirituality is not strongly attached to a specific tradition.

Connie is clear about her identity as a Christian and as a spiritual person. The two elements merge in a strong commitment to social justice causes. Connie has expressed her spiritual self by associating with communities committed to





changing the social order. Her spirituality is most accurately expressed in the active phase of an action/reflection model. Nevertheless, she is eloquent in articulating the connection between her faith and her commitments. She has spent considerable time working through those connections.

### **Emergence to Emergence-y**

The Roman Catholic women most often understood spirituality as the way in which they were directly related to God. As their conceptions and images of God changed, more possibilities for that relationship were incorporated into their spiritual practices. They felt free to experiment with new forms of expression and to evaluate the effects of those experiments. But no matter what form or process they described with regard to their relationship with God, the most obvious characteristic they communicated about that relationship was the intimacy they experienced. Their times of prayer, their conversations with God, were "close up and personal."

On the other hand, the Protestant women, more often than not, expressed spirituality in terms that indicated God was more impersonal and distant. For them, God was a being that was reliable, but not one that was available for frequent conversation. Diane represents this point of view: "What would you think if I said it doesn't seem terribly important to me to give God a form? . . . It's a force to me. It's a spirit. And that's enough for me. . . I feel the presence of this kind of force or spirit very strongly in my life, and that's enough." During times of



prayer, generally the Protestant women address a being from whom they expect a response, but there is a sense in their descriptions that the being they speak to is very different and separate from themselves. It's the reason, I think, they talk about their activities in the churches as part of their spirituality. Parish churches, because they are often face-to-face communities, stand in for an immediate relationship to God. The relationship is vicarious; I don't have the sense, except in Connie's case, that they have adopted an incarnational theology that says explicitly, "I experience God in my neighbor."

It would be a quantum leap for both groups to consider, "I encounter God (the sacred, the holy) in myself." Nevertheless, I believe the next theological challenge for them is to entertain that proposition. There is evidence that the partner in dialogue is making Her/His? presence felt.

In this chapter we have been discussing spirituality as the way in which humans express their relationship to God, to what they consider sacred. We have examined the ways that have been manifested in the lives of the ten women of the study. We have learned, by implication, what the women believe about the relationship. We have also explored, in the most superficial way, the differences among the Christian traditions with regard to this relationship (spirituality) We have not yet considered the partner we have in this relationship.

I do not want to review the many arguments for the existence of God, discussing the various features and implications. All of them have their roots in the study of philosophy and depend on one's ability to manipulate language so that





after the process of definition is complete, the argument is over. Nor do I want to rehearse the many discussions about the nature of God. I am much more interested in taking the approach of some scientists who are unafraid of information that doesn't conform to their expectations. I want to look at my experience, the experience of ten women and the testimony of countless others as they are reported in recent literature.<sup>2</sup>

As I reviewed my story and the narratives of the other women, I noticed that while there may have been "reasons" to make the choice we made, we were not forced by "necessity" to decide to make a major life change. We were, at the time we decided, agents who exercised the freedom available to us, making choices that were informed, but not determined either in the way they emerged or in their outcome. The choices were "new," and marked the beginning of new life for every woman of the study. None had second thoughts or regrets, even in the first days of anxiety about the long-term consequences of the choice.

Considering the givens of the decisions--they were not coerced by circumstance and they represented a genuinely new response to a situation--how shall we account for them?

In the previous chapter I suggested the categories of orientation and disorientation as useful ways to think about what was developing in the lives of the

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<sup>2</sup>As an example, in WomanChrist, says, "...if we are to discover our spirituality, [we] must trust our experience even when it doesn't seem to 'make sense.' The logic needs to flow out of the experience rather than be imposed on it as judgement" (p. 12).



women of the study. In this discussion, I want to talk about the transition from one condition to another. Walter Brueggemann, who is an insightful observer of the human condition as well as a biblical scholar, talks about the shift from one perception to another:

The move of the seasons (of life) is transformational and not developmental; that is, the move is never obvious, easy or 'natural.' It is always in pain and surprise, and in each age it is thinkable that a different move might have been made.<sup>3</sup>

He continues, describing the experience of the transition from orientation to disorientation:

One move we make is out of settled orientation into a season of disorientation. This move is experienced partly as changed circumstance, but it is much more a personal awareness and an acknowledgment of the changed circumstance. This may be an abrupt or slowly dawning acknowledgment. It constitutes a dismantling of the old known world and relinquishment of safe, reliable confidence in God's good creation. The movement of dismantling includes a rush of negativities, including rage, resentment, guilt, shame, isolation, despair, hatred and hostility.<sup>4</sup>

Brueggemann is unapologetic in speaking of God as the source of the newness and of the motivation for entering the transition from settled security to confusion and anxiety and then to the surprise of a new and better orientation. Brueggemann's God, however, is not the same God I believe inspires the "new thing" in women's lives. In subsequent paragraphs, he describes God's activity as "intervention" and "giving," terms that indicate God's position as outside and

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<sup>3</sup>Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 20.



separate from the immediate and concrete situation. The Holy One<sup>5</sup> I perceive in the women's stories is intimately associated with the particulars of the situations and with the women themselves.

The Holy One of emergence-y is the sacred mystery that dwells in each of us, the source of restlessness and distress when our lives are off course and/or stuck in numbing cycles. The Holy One of emergence-y is the impetus behind the growth that cannot be denied or reversed. The Holy One of emergence-y wells up from within and can therefore be trusted in a way no "gift" ever can be.

I believe it is this sacred mystery that contributed the impulse to the women who "took their lives in their own hands." At the moment of choice to live, the mystery of life was given voice and visibility in a world that is organized to deny life to women and many others. Its manifestation is testimony to its power and its persistence.<sup>6</sup>

The Holy One who dwells within each of us occupies whatever forms and space are available. The women who were less practiced in inviting and responding to the sacred in a personal way, experienced the emergence of the "new" by means other than the spiritual practices they were accustomed to. Even those women in

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<sup>5</sup>I have a difficult time with "God"--the word is too freighted with male imagery and the weight of the entire Western Christian tradition. To convey a sense of a different "God" I prefer terms like the Holy One.

<sup>6</sup>This is a conclusion shared by the authors of The Feminine Face of God. Their thesis is "something new is emerging in female psyches today" (p.4). Later, they elaborate on the observation, "Although we live in an age when there seems to be a psychological explanation for everything, something much deeper than psychological cause and effect is (being) reflected" (p. 44).





religious life felt the surge of new life through avenues not usually identified by them as "spiritual." New experiences, new contexts, new challenges opened the opportunity for new self understanding to take place.

Once the process began, the "I AM"<sup>7</sup> grew and emerged into the consciousness of the women. Jane and Audrey began a new relationship with themselves through their experience of intensive training for formation work. Audrey reflected, "I became more and more who I am." Jane's description of her process was, "coming home to myself." Diane and Doris knew themselves in a different way through their wonderful experiences of returning to college. Betty said of that time, "I was growing into myself." At the end of her pivotal 30-day retreat, Linda could say emphatically, "I'm not a phony any more." Sue's time of

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<sup>7</sup>According to the Christian biblical tradition, YHWH, often translated "I AM," was suggested to Moses by the Holy One of Israel as a way to be identified to the people of Israel when they were challenged to depart from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3:14).

YHWH is a verbal form derived from "to be" and may be translated as "I am who I am" or "He causes to be." The designation is associated with God's action and presence in historical affairs (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, [New York: Oxford University Press, 1973], p. 70).

Although this designation has traditionally referred to God's involvement and participation in history, through agents of God's choosing, I intended by its use to suggest the possibility that there is a corresponding power that wells up in the lives of individuals. As the Holy One is able to find the means of self expression in the collective affairs of humanity, I believe the Holy One may participate in the lives of individuals to reveal to those individuals and to others another aspect of the sacred. I am suggesting humanity shows, as part of the image of God, the impulse to make manifest in tangible, concrete ways what is most authentic about oneself.



reflection revealed another aspect of who she was that could not be nurtured in a place that was otherwise satisfying to her.<sup>8</sup>

As the effects of the growing self awareness spread, the growing sense of the sacredness that dwelt within themselves, emergence turned to emergence-y. The time of disorientation was a time of doubt, sometimes confusion, sometimes fear. It was a time of frustration and sometimes pain. At some point, "I AM" spoke more insistently and an important divide was crossed.

It would be too glib to say that the terrain on the far side of the watershed is radically different from the landscape that is already familiar to the women. The term "reorientation" suggests much more definition and clarity than the territory warrants. At most, they can claim the virtue of new insight that lets them see differently and choose differently because different details are now apparent. They expect "reorientation" to proceed so long as they continue to experience "emergence" of new self-understanding.

As the women remembered how they were feeling after the time of emergence-y, they spoke about the new sense of themselves and what that meant for them. Sue was moved to say, "This person I just discovered is as important as those I have worked for in the past." She grew in the realization that she was called to advocate for herself as effectively as she had advocated for others before.

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<sup>8</sup>The authors of The Feminine Face of God (New York: Bantam Books, 1991) describe how the women they interviewed have concluded their most important task in finding a satisfactory relationship to the sacred was to live authentically rather than to self-consciously pursue spiritual development (p. 12).





Diane described her process: "At school, I felt truly turned on, in a way I hadn't felt turned on in a long time, as a person, as an individual. That felt good and right and gave me strength to do what I felt for some time I needed to do."

Pat's reflection on the process was, "something inside leads me." Her conclusion now is, "There is great comfort in being able to be yourself."

Mary's transformation was associated with paying genuine attention to what she was feeling. She said, "I realized how I felt and had the courage to go with my experience, to go with my gut. That's new. Once I started practicing that I felt better."

One woman's testimony describes the move toward integrity and emergence-y and summarizes the experience nicely. She said, "I really felt a sort of slowly evolving something all the way along." She continued, "I think (the core of myself) might be out there in many different pieces, and gradually we take it in and it kind of gets put together. I don't think necessarily that it's all there and we can't get to it or don't touch it. I think it just has to be taken in somehow as you experience, as you find something you suddenly say, 'Aha' to, or 'Hey, that rings true. That's important to me, therefore it's me.'"



## CHAPTER VII

*Robert: How do you mean voices?*  
*Joan: I heard voices telling me what to do.*  
*Robert: They come from your imagination.*  
*Joan: Of course. That is how the messages*  
*from God come to us.*

G.B. Shaw  
Saint Joan

### EMERGENCE-Y AS IMAGINATION

This project has been difficult to name. From the beginning it has resisted my efforts to give it form or to focus its direction. At first, I considered variations of "conversion" as the unifying theme, but I abandoned that as the conservative religious associations overwhelmed the sense of metanoia I was trying to communicate.<sup>1</sup> For a time I settled on "Choose This Day"; I liked the emphasis

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<sup>1</sup>Carol Christ in Diving Deep and Surfacing (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980) has a second objection to conversion: "Awakening is perhaps a more appropriate term than 'conversion' for describing women's mystical experience, because 'awakening' suggests that the self only needs to notice what is already there. Awakening implies that the ability to see or know is within the self, once the sleeping draft is refused. Conversion often seems to imply that one has turned from one source of authority to another, for example, from materialism to God. It seems to be characteristic of women's awakening that the great powers, while larger than the self, are within as well as without" (p. 18). I would argue that the transformation that women experience is interactive. Not only do the great powers dwell within individuals, the great powers collaborate and co-create with individuals to bring about the transformative changes.



on choice as well as the allusion to the passage from Deuteronomy that challenges us to make a choice for life on behalf of ourselves and our children.

But, as time passed, I was less and less happy about the focus that title gave to "decision." I wanted to communicate something more complex about the experiences of the women I interviewed and about my own story. A decision to leave a religious order or a marriage was not something that happened to us, an event that we were forced to accept by virtue of circumstance. Neither was it a completely free and unencumbered choice. The most obvious characteristic of the decision was the extended period of reflection and debate that preceded it. In addition to circumstance, in addition to an individual's ability to decide, there seemed to be a third component involved, an elusive force or entity that kept the issue alive and moving forward. I named the entity "spirit" for want of a more accurate title. The subtitle of the project became "The Spirituality of Women at Mid-life." Although the title served its purpose, it did not serve well. It failed to communicate anything about the genesis of the project and it revealed nothing about the energy that was associated with the topic.

Early on, I was challenged to be specific about what I meant by "spirituality." I wrestled with the task without much success. For me, "spirit" was the energy or power that had the capacity to move or change a situation. Since my own experience included a significant period when I felt blocked, I wanted to know more about the source of power that broke through the limiting conditions. A second aspect of spirituality for me had to do with the drive for consistency and integrity





that I felt was part of my experience. Because "spirit" is intangible, I understood "spirituality" to be the way in which values are made evident to others. In its broadest sense, I understood spirituality to be the choices I made for my life that communicated to others what my inner self was like. That included such mundane activities as recycling to arranging icons in satisfying clusters, from advocating for public resources for the homeless to choosing appropriate gifts to celebrate important events in the lives of my friends. In my experience, and I hoped in the lives of the other women, the intersection of ethics, aesthetics and passion at the point of a significant choice was the occasion for spiritual expression.

I clung to this way of defining spirituality as the entree into the experience I wanted to explore even when the stories of the women I interviewed did not put these concerns at the center of their narratives. The reason, of course, is the multitude of ways to understand spirituality. In speaking to prospective subjects, I had emphasized my interest in their spiritual lives at the time of their decision, so the women who agreed to participate expected to discuss that aspect of their experience.

As I collected their stories, I found there was little congruity between what I was hearing and what I had hoped to find. My definition of spirituality was too abstract to be useful in sorting out the common themes of the interviews. All the women would identify themselves as spiritual women, but their understanding of the term was different from mine. Because I wanted the material to reflect how the women thought about themselves and their spiritual life, I did not screen potential



subjects on the basis of uniform conceptions of spirituality. So I had to conclude that I needed to revisit how I was defining spirituality; what I hadn't counted on was reassessing "spiritual" altogether.

Sometime over last summer, the title came to me. The singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, has a song called "Emergency." The word to the chorus include, "Souls in a state of emergency." What if, I thought, the word emergency was considered a second way? What if "emerge" was emphasized--souls in a state of emergence-y? "Emergence" solved the dilemma I had concerning the relative weight to give to choice or circumstance. And it certainly captured what I had been hearing--the emerging, unfolding, developing, growing awareness of women as they worked their way through difficult and complex circumstances. The title was suggestive, which I liked, and it seemed accurate.

It was only later I noticed that no where was "spirit" mentioned. The title said "soul," not "spirit." Like a good many other people, I was not troubled by the distinction; I simply let one stand for the other.

While I was mulling over this question, I was also considering how to address the third issue that seemed to be significant in my experience. The emergence of images and metaphors into my consciousness at critical points along the way was a phenomenon that fascinated me. I felt they were more than eruptions of unconscious wishes into my conscious awareness; they had a quality of grace and compassion as well as a sense of purpose. They were critical to my sense of confidence and well-being as I negotiated times of anxiety and uncertainty. Without





the assistance of their presence, I would have floundered, perhaps lost my way. Although the images were not the only factor involved in successful transitions, they made an important contribution. The key role they played in my experience persuaded me to include questions about images in the interviews I conducted. Although I rarely recall dreams, I knew they were important sources of images and metaphors for others; I included dreams as part of the category I asked about. In my case, meaningful images appear during periods of reflective wakefulness. I make the assumption that their source is similar to the source that inspires dreams.

Like the responses concerning spirituality, information about images, metaphors and dreams did not conform to my expectations. In the case of spirituality, I could adjust my definition to match the understanding of my subjects in order to proceed with analysis. With regard to images, dreams and metaphors, the situation is less clear.

Certainly none of the women identified emerging images to be as critical to her process as they seemed to be for me. However, several spoke of dreams that conveyed important truths at times that were pivotal.

Jane was grateful for an experience one sleepless night as she was nearing the culmination of her decision. In the darkness, she saw a kaleidoscope of images of her years in religious life. She saw herself happy in ministry and in the work she was doing, but unhappy in community life. The two aspects competed in her consciousness. She felt the tension of the two realities and declared, "I can't live this way." Her declaration was followed by a wash of light that conveyed



permission. She was left with an inner peace that was unlike anything she had felt for a long time.

Audrey also experienced a dream that encouraged her to continue to move in the direction of leaving the order. She described a scene that included a building that had appeared in earlier dreams. She interpreted the building as either the institutional church or a convent. The building was located on spacious grounds, surrounded by a park with footpaths leading into the woods. Audrey was walking on one of the paths and came upon a sign pointing in the direction she was going that said, "This way to the living light." As she continued to walk along the path, she passed several of these signs. Then she came upon the final sign that said, "Last chance for the living light." Although Audrey had experienced the dream over ten years before, as she spoke to me it was obvious that she was still affected by it. She said of that time in her life, "It was then that I made my decision that my chance for life was to free myself from the building."

Diane reported an active dream life--she keeps a dream journal, writing down the content of dreams as she wakes each morning. Although she recalled several that spoke to her in recent years about decisions and relationships, she did not remember dreams or other images during the time of decision making.

Nancy, who practiced meditation for many years, reported an experience that included powerful images as part of the events that posed the first questions about the viability of her marriage. After several weeks of intensive workshops in psychotherapy, she was exhausted, so was sleeping soundly at night. On the last



morning of her stay, she woke up in the middle of amazing sensations. It was "an entirely different kind of experience and it was like light--just light. But it wasn't coming from outside. It was coming from inside. As I was still waking up I could see what was there and as I woke I was trying to hold on to it and it kept going away. But it was enough to say 'I don't know what this is, but it is incredible.'"

She met with the director of the program for her last interview later that morning. He observed, "Things are happening with you, aren't they?" He followed the question with a request that Nancy convey some letters for him. She readily agreed. He said, "You're an angel. Do you know why? Because you are a messenger. That's what angel means." For Nancy, it provided a connection to her earlier experience and with the image of Annunciation that had been a part of the material she reflected on during the training course. "I named (the morning's experience) as an annunciation, which is what it felt like. Anyway, I took on this image. This is an extraordinary experience, one that is tied to the meditations when I would have this incredible sense of being home and being free simultaneously which I never had before."

Because only four of the ten women reported powerful experiences of dreams or images as helpful to them, I can not conclude such experiences are a uniform element in times of crisis for women. Nevertheless, the proportion is sufficient to warrant further exploration and reflection.

About the same time I was compiling and organizing the material from the interviews and coming to the conclusion that imagination was not necessarily an





important resource for women when they were considering an important decision, I received an issue of Common Boundary that encouraged me to re-think this portion of the study. The magazine was established to explore the interface between spirituality and psychology, the frontier I have been occupying for some time. The issue was devoted to archetypal psychology, including several articles on "soul."

What I gleaned from that issue of Common Boundary was an introduction to a part of depth psychology identified as archetypal psychology. At the outset, I want to acknowledge that my investigation of the suitability of this perspective is at its beginning stages and that my major reservations are associated with the many uses and misuses the concept "archetype" has provoked. Nevertheless, I discovered insights that "explain" what I was trying to understand about my experience and the experience of the women I interviewed.

The first insight I considered was James Hillman's distinction between spirit and soul. Like many in our culture, I have paid little heed to "soul," feeling that the connotations it carries in popular parlance make it unhelpful as a category to understand contemporary experience. Secondly, "soul" implies an intimacy that "spirit" does not; in public discourse, it is easier to speak about a disembodied force or "spirit" than sustain the attentiveness necessary to consider the uniqueness and preciousness of an identity that "soul" conveys. Care must be taken in communicating what "soul" means in any discussion because there are so many ways to understand the term.



It is best to begin by saying what it isn't. Hillman's distinctions are useful:

Today, we have rather lost this difference that most cultures, even tribal ones, know and live in terms of. Our distinctions are Cartesian: between outer tangible reality and inner states of mind, or between body and a fuzzy conglomerate of mind, psyche and spirit. We have lost the third, middle position which earlier in our tradition, and in others too, was the place of soul: a world of imagination, passion, fantasy, reflection that is neither physical and material on the one hand, nor spiritual and abstract on the other, yet bound to them both.<sup>2</sup>

An immediate attraction for me in this careful description was the possibility of finding a way to consider "self", my identity, the core of my being, in a way that rejected the dualism that many psychologies perpetuate. Behaviorists limit their information to measurable phenomena, and depth psychologists depend on the work of the mind, insight, to determine what information about a person is most important. "Soul" as the middle position, a place of encounter between the material and spiritual, is an appealing solution to the impasse our habits of thought have given us.

Hillman elaborates:

The threefold division has collapsed into two, because soul has become identified with spirit. This happens because we are all materialists, so that everything that is not physical and bodily is one undifferentiated cloud; or it happens because we are Christians. . . . Philosophers have tried to keep the line between spirit and soul by keeping soul altogether out of their works or assigning it a lower place.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>James Hillman, Re-Visioning of Psychology (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975), pp. 67-68.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 68.





As Hillman continues the description of "spirit", I began to see how the term "spiritual" may not always best describe a process that is happening to women. He says:

The spiritual point of view always posits itself as superior and operates particularly well in fantasy of transcendence among ultimates and absolutes. . . The world of spirit is different indeed. Its images blaze with light, there is fire, wind, sperm. Spirit is fast, and it quickens what it touches. Its direction is vertical and ascending; it is arrow-straight, knife-sharp, powder-dry and phallic. It is masculine, the active principle, making forms, order, and clear distinctions. Although there are many spirits, and many kinds of spirit, more and more the notion of 'spirit' has come to be carried by the Apollonic archetype, the sublimations of higher and abstract principles, the intellectual mind, refinements and purifications.<sup>4</sup>

Hillman uses "Apollonic" and "masculine" to differentiate "spirit" from "soul." It is one of the inconsistencies in his scheme, for he implies that "soul," then, is the feminine counterpart to "spirit." If soul, in his framework, is the middle category, then the feminine counterpart to spirit would be the material world, not the entity that is the consequence of the encounter of the two. Hillman's contribution is identifying the third perspective, the perspective of "soul," but his Jungian constructs prevent him from speculating what it would mean to understand it free from the dualism his tradition perpetuates. If it were possible to liberate "soul" from this unfortunate lapse in consistency, I believe it is a helpful category by which to understand the kind of emergence-y I experienced and others experience. As the

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 68.



"third," soul is the impulse and occasion for integration.<sup>5</sup>

As Hillman continues to describe the distinguishing activities of "soul" and "spirit," it becomes evident that the distinction would be helpful for women to understand why spiritual disciplines, in the forms found in Christian churches, are not helpful in working through the kind of process we have been considering. Our language and our traditions have connected integration, the emergence of integrity, with abstraction and transcendence; however, the impulse to integrate we have explored in this study has resisted the temptation to escape to simple gratification of the mind or of the body. "Soul" represents both/and in an either/or world. Hillman outlines the role "soul" plays in the process:

We can experience soul and spirit interacting. At moments of intellectual concentration or transcendental meditation, soul invades with natural urges, memories, fantasies and fears. At times of new psychological insights or experiences, spirit would quickly extract a meaning, put them into action, conceptualize them into rules. Soul sticks to the realm of experience and to reflections within experience. It moves indirectly in circular reasonings, where retreats are as important as advances, preferring labyrinths and corners, giving a metaphorical sense to life. . . Soul is imagination, a cavernous treasury--a confusion and richness, both. Whereas spirit chooses the better part and seeks to make all One. Look up, says spirit, gain distance; there is something beyond and above, and what is above is always, and all ways superior. . . I have drawn apart soul and spirit in order to make us feel the differences and especially to feel what happens to soul when its phenomena are viewed from the perspective of spirit. Then, it seems, the soul must be disciplined, its desires harnessed, imagination emptied, dreams forgotten, involvements

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<sup>5</sup> Integration has an unfortunate association with the notion of separateness and purity that "integer" suggests. Integration in human terms is not simplification in order to become complete or whole; it is a process of taking into account and relating many and disparate elements.





dried. For soul, says spirit, cannot know, neither truth, nor law, nor cause. . .(It) shall be cured by making soul into an imitation of spirit. . . (by putting) one's soul on a spiritual path which supposedly leads to freedom.<sup>6</sup>

There was a second aspect of Hillman's discussion that sealed my conviction that I needed to rethink the terms of my project. In Hillman's view, soul is a perspective rather than a substance, a perspective that mediates experience. It is the intangible component that makes meaning possible, turns events into experiences. "Soul" is the

...imaginative possibility in our natures, the experiencing through reflective speculation, dream, image and fantasy, that mode which recognizes all realities as primarily symbolic or metaphorical.<sup>7</sup>

He stakes out his position:

Here I am working toward a psychology of soul that is based in a psychology of image. Here I am suggesting both a poetic basis of mind and a psychology that starts neither in the psychology of the brain, the structure of language, the organization of society nor the analysis of behavior, but in the process of imagination.<sup>8</sup>

While the data from this study is not conclusive, it is suggestive that imagination is a key resource for individual women as they struggle to find more freedom from internalized and external constraints. Marion Woodman collaborated with three other women on a project of self-reflection that culminated in the book, Leaving My Father's House. In an interview, she relates how important imagination was to each woman's process:

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. x.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. xi.





Each woman struggled to free herself from bondage to patriarchal thinking, whether in the university, the church, her relationship to her family, even her relationship to her own body. In each story, the unconscious contributed images that not only support but guide, the process in ways consciousness could never have conceived.<sup>9</sup>

Knowing ourselves--who we have been, who we are, who we might become--depends on attending to our imaginations.

Elaine Scarry, in The Body in Pain, points out that the object of torture, of extreme pain, is the imagination. She says imagination is the source of creativity, the place of "making up." Pain destroys the content of imagination; torture is meant to punish imagination for the images that may be there. The point of torture is to eradicate any "thinkable" alternative to the reality the torturer supports. If images can be obliterated, there is no possibility for images to be "made real" (substantiated) in the world.<sup>10</sup>

Imagination is subversive. Walter Brueggemann in Prophetic Imagination asserts:

It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one. Indeed, poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality.<sup>11</sup>

As the women in the study approached a significant life change, one reason

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<sup>9</sup>Anne A. Simpkinson, "In Her Own Voice," in Common Boundary, Vol. 10, Issue 4, July/August 1992, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup>A summary of Scarry's conclusion found in chapter 3, "Pain and Imagining," Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 161-180.

<sup>11</sup>Walter Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination, p. 45.



they may have become immobilized was their inability to imagine another way of living. If a woman was inexperienced when she made her first decision, she had few models for her imagination to work with. The options in the world she lived in were limited, in part by the containment of imaginative powers, the suppression of her soul.

The eruption of images into the women's consciousness, whether through dreams or by other means, was a way "soul" communicated to the women how desperate the situation was becoming. It is no accident that the majority of women in this study expressed fears of "dying." The psychic pain they were feeling threatened the viability of the soul; imagination was in danger of disappearing altogether. It is telling, I think, that in no case were images of the future given. The message of the soul was focused in support for leaving the situation that was perceived as responsible for producing the pain. Basically, imagination repudiated the orientation that had dominated the women's lives.

Disorientation was already a reality for them, however, even as they considered their decision. It was part of the process of loosening the bonds and limits of orientation. Its unsettling aspect contributed to the women's anxiety about what they could expect on the other side of the decision.

The decision did not end the feeling of disorientation; if anything, it intensified. Women entered a world with out-of-date and incomplete maps. Gradually they relied less and less on the maps and more and more on their instincts and abilities to navigate the landscape. They were almost re-oriented.





I believe reorientation will be complete when their imaginations are active and they will be able to trust what emerges there. A tangible, visible sign of that will be their ability to be pro-active in creating their own life, of truly "taking their life in their own hands."<sup>12</sup>

I have idealized the process. Just as the approach to making a significant decision moved erratically, the new orientation is also subject to many conditions and considerations. None of us walk confidently straight forward all the time. Nevertheless, when the hold of damaging and painful patterns and structures have been loosened, and women allow themselves to experience the world more directly than they could before, new things happen. Creative powers are released.

Connie is an example--her contribution has been essential to the growth and development of several organizations for social change, including a national movement related to Central America. Jane has collaborated with a colleague to establish a new center to deal with the special psychological issues of women and men in religious life. Doris has assumed leadership of a respected women's organization and is bubbling over with ideas to make it more responsive to contemporary needs. Sue's creative response to conditions in her place of work

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<sup>12</sup>In the play, After the Fall, Arthur Miller supports this argument: "The same dream returned each night until I dared not go to sleep and grew quite ill. I dreamed I had a child, and even in the dream I saw it as my life, and it was an idiot, and I ran away. But it always crept back into my lap again, clutched at my clothes. Until I thought, if I could kiss it, whatever was in it was my own, perhaps I could sleep. And I bent to its broken face, and it was horrible. . . but I kissed it. I think one must finally take one's life in one's arms."



garnered recent public recognition for her. Several women write, some in the poetic mode.

Reorientation is the process of adjusting to the internal gyroscope that is a reliable resource for meeting the conditions one encounters. It is not finding a new map, nor is it making a new map. It is accepting the reality that the world we inhabit is an open, complex system, one that each of us participates in creating. Reorientation is being comfortable in an indeterminate world.



## CHAPTER VIII

*...soul or psyche is image  
But soul also wants to do something,  
to act, and not only one act is  
available to soul - to create.*

Robert Sardello  
"Soul Tasks of the Coming Age"

### EMERGENCE-Y AS WORK IN PROGRESS

As Doris and I concluded our interview, she thanked me for the opportunity to tell her story once more. "You know," she said, "each time I tell it I have a chance to look at things again and say to myself, 'Not bad, not bad at all.' I can rest easy with who I am; that comes from telling (my story) again and again." I left feeling encouraged. Here was a woman in her 60's who was still pondering the meaning of her life and finding reasons to appreciate what she had done for herself. Her emergency had come and gone; her emergence was still going strong.

In this project I discovered that the emergency that I selected to distinguish the group of women I wanted to study was a signal of a process that began long before and extended long after the defining moment of decision. Emergence is the most important aspect of emergency.

To select a sample of women to interview, I used the crisis of a life-changing decision (leaving a marriage or leaving a religious order) to determine the population of women I would choose from. When I began, I was preoccupied with





"decision," assuming that choosing was the critical aspect of the life histories of the women. As I listened to the stories, I learned that "decision" was an important landmark on their landscape, but it did not have the prominence of a chasm or a mountain peak. More often than not, the decision was preceded by other decisions, other features that gave indications of what was to come. Similarly it was followed by events and decisions that consolidated or amplified what had been developing for a considerable period. In my sample, the decision did not stand out as a solitary event in the lives of the women as a mesa stands in solitude in the desert. Rather, as the women describe their processes, the choices they made seemed to be a cumulative matter; they may have crossed a continental divide, but they had traversed many peaks and valleys before they encountered the mountain range of most significance.

With that insight, personal liberation must be understood in terms of process rather than event. Emergence may precipitate emergence-y, a convergence of forces that makes a conscious decision necessary, but the matter does not end with that choice, no matter how important or pivotal it may be. Emergence-y may signal the loosening of the bonds that seemed to determine one's fate and one's choices, but those constraints are never fully evaded. Personal liberation is always relative.

At the point of decision, emergence of self-awareness and self-appreciation have proceeded sufficiently for a woman to realize the orientation urged upon her from birth is unable to deliver to her the promises it purports to make to all people. The old structure of meaning is abandoned because it is not only inadequate from



the point of view of experience, it is also personally harmful to continue to use is to negotiate the landscape. The reality of disorientation is embraced as a better option for at least it is an accurate reflection of what is real for a woman.

As the material in the study shows, emergence becomes emergence-y long before a reorientation is apparent. The women of this sample were willing to step into a future they could only dimly perceive or imagine. A decision to make a major change in one's life depends not only on recognizing the limitations of what one has known, it also requires the critical ingredient of hope. Hope depends on imagination for its life. Liberation requires a dream, no matter how vague or undefined. To get free of one's bonds, whether internal or external, one has to "know" that there are other possibilities than those that have been present in the past. Imagination, the location of creativity where we "make up" any "new thing," is essential for the liberation process.

Imagination is our birthright. It is an element of the "imago Dei" that we receive as children of God. It can, however, be stolen from us by the forces that benefit from the present arrangement of power. Elaine Scarry has shown how torture is a direct attack on imagination; the enemy of oppression is a picture of an alternative. The implicit purpose and function of domestic violence is similar to torture--to rob victims of their ability to believe anything else than the status quo is possible. The intent of violence is to impose nightmares in the place of dreams or to appropriate "dream" to name schemes unworthy of the designation.

Liberation depends on dreamers, the prophetic folks who, at minimum, say,





"This is not all there is to life." Personal liberation depends on dreams, pictures, images that tell us to expect something more for ourselves and for others.

Liberation depends on dreamers, those with a lively imagination, for another reason. Agency, the ability to choose and the power to make things happen, depends on imagination to put together the vision or goal that then can be constructed. Any exercise of agency strengthens its power. Women who decide to make a change become agents. They not only change the course of their lives, they change the process of their lives. They participate in making up and making real the life they imagine for themselves. The limitations of the landscape do not disappear, but women who are agents make choices about how they will relate to the landscape in a new way.

Emergence is work in progress. Fueled by imagination, it is the process by which we participate in making the future, for ourselves and for others. The emergence of soul is the process that empowers women to spin and weave new structures for our lives together.

What do the findings and conclusions of this study mean for theology?

First, I would urge a wider use of "soul" to talk about women's growing self-awareness and self-appreciation. "Women's spirituality" has been an integral part of the changes brought by the second wave of feminism and the insights associated with it are critical to the vitality of feminism. Nevertheless, the designation perpetuates an implicit dualism that, at bottom, feminism wishes to eradicate. The categories of material and spiritual are embedded in our vocabulary and their



distinction is understood as oppositional. The strength of feminist thought is its commitment to find a way to speak of both/and. "Soul" as the "third" entity, the point of encounter between spirit and matter is an appealing resolution to the dualism.

Further, the definition of soul as the location of imagination identifies soul with creativity, a function that humanity is invited to share with the Creator. Soul becomes a way to locate the activity of the Holy One within us. Soul is the "tent of meeting," the tabernacle where the sacred encounters the mundane and where the sacred is "pleased to dwell."

The liberation of all women depends on finding a way to attribute value to each person as person. The hierarchies established and supported by Christian theology need to be challenged. So long as "spiritual" is perceived as superior and God's transcendence is the first characteristic we acknowledge, the devaluation of women will continue. We will need to find a way to understand God as a participant in life, not as an observer or as a manipulator.

Secondly, I believe Naomi Goldenberg's analysis in Changing of the Gods is accurate. She begins her argument with these assessments:

When feminists set up cornerstones for a new theology, the foundations of this theology need grounding in a place more earthly and immediate than those described by the old abstract terminology of transcendence.<sup>1</sup>

She continues with the observation that liberation theologians have made the

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<sup>1</sup>Naomi Goldenberg, Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p.23.



connection between liberation of Third World and oppressed peoples with the necessity for the "overthrow of hierarchies within the mind." (her emphasis) She concludes theology will be seen

...in a more psychological sense, to transforming theology from theorizing about a god 'out there' to reflecting on forces and values within human senses and feelings. . . . Feminist theology is on its way to becoming psychology.<sup>2</sup>

Goldenberg suggests what direction theology will take when the old forms no longer inspire allegiance. She says:

...since introspection does follow the death of fathers, then the death of father-gods could mean the onset of religious forms which emphasize awareness of oneself and tend to understand gods and goddesses as inner psychic forces.<sup>3</sup>

She too has found Hillman's distinctions between spirit and soul helpful. She devotes a substantial chapter to the power of imagination and its function in moving into the new place of theology. She adopts Jungian thought with care, suggesting ways to relativize the definition of archetypes so that Jung's insights about imagination can be a useful contribution to a fresh approach to theology.

Goldenberg concludes:

When we study the religious thought of those who have already outgrown the father-god--the witches, the radical feminists, the modern psychologists--we see a direction inward. All of these people tend to place their gods within themselves, to focus on spiritual processes whose values they experience internally. Judging from these harbingers of our new religious culture, the psycho-religious age will be a mystical one. It seems highly likely that the West is on the brink of developing a new mysticism--post-Christian, post-Judaic. It

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.41.





will most probably be a type of mysticism which emphasizes the continual observation of psychic imagery.<sup>4</sup>

Although Goldenberg's book has been available for over a decade, it is still too soon to know if her predictions are accurate. Feminist liberation theology has been committed to a social analysis that takes seriously the systemic forces that oppress and violate marginal populations, recognizing that women everywhere are victims of the dominant worldview. It is important to remember that women are empowered to be agents for change when they have begun to be agents for themselves. Although consciousness-raising has had an important place in this second feminist movement, it has not been rendered unnecessary by the advances of the last decades. Personal liberation is a component of the movement to eliminate oppression. Like political liberation, it is work in progress.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 120.



## CHAPTER IX

*Spiritual disease, sin, evil -- call the problem what you will -- is rooted in misplaced authority. Each person must struggle between turning herself -- her soul -- over to others and accepting the essential responsibility for living her own life. The demon...is exorcised when we accept our humanness -- our power and our lack of power.*

Carter Heyward  
A Priest Forever

### AUTHORITY

Intrinsic to the process of emergence-y is resolving a question of authority. Underneath the struggle to come to a decision about the course of one's life is the hard labor of discovering what is authoritative for one's life. Another way of asking the same question is to ask what values are most important in one's life. Making a life-changing decision involves "pledging allegiance" to what is most authoritative for the individual.

It is impossible for us to function in any society without a conscious grid of values that helps us find our way through the many choices we make daily. We have an internal road map that tells us what to expect to find in our environment, how the various elements are related, what the optimum path between and among those elements would be. This road map is authoritative--it provides a structure of meaning for the overwhelming volume of data we receive every second of our lives. It connects "facts" in a coherent way and thereby provides an explanation for both





the how and the why of the world. Consequently it tells us what is "right" and what is "wrong."

Our road map is not simply a figment of our imaginations. We do not make it up in isolation or apart from tangible reality or significant relationships. Although as infants we begin without any knowledge of landmarks, paths or their relationship, we immediately begin receiving and sorting information. The chaos of stimuli begins to feel familiar as events repeat themselves. Particular configurations present themselves over and over again. Soon we learn how to induce certain events to happen. By that time, we have already begun to absorb the road map of the family into which we were born. At this point we are not in a position to choose the structure of meaning for ourselves; we are caught up in the process of learning what the world is like, how we can affect the world and how we can avoid unpleasant sensations that come in our interaction with the world.

Gradually, we acquire from our web of relationships a reliable outline for negotiating our context. Our dependency gradually diminishes as we move from simply reacting to events to initiating purposeful activity that indicates we have mastered enough of the road map to strike out on our own.

As we acquire this structure that gives us a sense of confidence and security, we are mostly unaware of the deep structure of meaning the road map represents. We soak up the values of our family. Until we move to the edges of the map that we have, the places that are marked "unexplored territory" or "wilderness", we have no way to evaluate the structure that we have absorbed. While we remain within



the limits of the road map of our family, we live out the values of that context. At first, there is no question of allegiance; an individual can make a choice only when options are apparent. As long as a structure satisfies the needs of an individual, allegiance to that structure is taken for granted. Our human need for order and meaning encourages us to remain within a worldview until there is a significant challenge to its veracity.

The structure we live within not only provides us with reliable information about how to navigate in the world, it also tells us something about ourselves. To the extent we have a "place" in the structure, we have an identity. As long as our structure is satisfactory, we know who we are because we know where we are in relation to the outline of meaning we live in. We have a sense of integrity so long as there is little friction between the choices we have in our context and the desires that emerge from ourselves.

The authoritative structure of childhood prevails unquestioned and unexamined until experience creates a tension, a discomfort, a dis-ease that challenges the accuracy of the road map we have been using. Gradually, as we interact with our environment and with others, pieces of the map are revised and refined. Perhaps there are big chunks of reality left unexamined by our family that we are encouraged to explore by peers or mentors. When we do, we are obliged to re-shape our individual maps, distinguishing them from the standard issue of our families. The process of revision can continue for considerable time without the fundamental structure being challenged. Refining and embellishing a sound



structure does not call into question the fundamental veracity of the structure. "Mistakes" in drawing the map can be accommodated; the minor tensions that experience generates usually can be relieved by tinkering with the map we have. Until we experience a major challenge to our perception of how the world is put together, we will not have to examine what has been assumed before -- our allegiance to a particular worldview as an adequate representation of the values and meaning we want to support. We face that kind of challenge when fundamental truths, as we perceive them, are called into question. The issue of authority is raised to consciousness. An event which demonstrates the structure of meaning we have been using not only contains errors, but is harmful or significantly misleading, is an event which literally shakes our foundations.

It is theoretically possible that such a challenge can be initiated by a problem of logic or rationality. But practically speaking, a challenge that involves more of our selves, our identity, our integrity, our allegiance, is generated from a deep and compelling personal experience. Something happens that makes it impossible to continue using the old map with confidence. Settled issues are up for grabs; important questions have to be answered that we never thought would have to be asked.

Reality is constructed. It is constructed on several levels. We do make our maps, our guides for negotiating the culture we live in. But more importantly, the culture we inhabit is a construction, a web of connections woven by the myriad interactions and decisions of persons, past and present. However each individual





understands reality for her/himself, it is a complex record of accumulated ideas, experiences, and interactions with the physical world and other people. Understanding and interacting with reality is a dynamic process, not only because internal maps are in constant revision and refinement, but also because the nature of reality itself is dynamic. Heraclitis was right, we never step into the same river twice.

I would extend Heraclitis' principle by asserting that each of us steps into her/his own river. By that I do not mean that each of us inhabits a separate, isolated reality, completely unique and therefore impossible to share with any one else. I mean that each of us has an independent worldview that is a consequence of our own unique combination of experiences and personal resources. Each person's perspective is a product of interaction with others and with the physical components of one's life. We share the material world--it provides a common base that our individual maps have to take into account. Some of the features of our worldview are a consequence of our affective life--the part of ourselves that develops from the give and take with other human beings. Our personal maps cannot be absolutely unique because a significant portion of those maps are constructed in relation to other humans. The language we use to mediate the distance and difference between our internal maps is a social construction that is both given (in that we acquire the implicit structure as we learn to talk as children) and dynamic (Anyone who has had to learn to use a computer at mid-life will attest to the necessity to change at least part of one's internal map to accommodate a new



vocabulary, a vocabulary that indicates a change, an expansion of reality.)

Maps of reality have elements in common, the most obvious being the way in which individual humans deal with the physical limitations we are immersed in. In addition, those who share a common culture will have similar perspectives on reality since our structure of meaning is absorbed during our formative years. But even among those who share a culture, even a family experience, there will be significant differences in their worldview to be able to say each of us steps into our own river.

Our internal maps help us negotiate our lives in at least two significant ways. First, maps tell us what to expect. As such, we are helped to anticipate events and to be prepared for predictable occurrences. On the other hand, we may miss elements "out there" because we failed to attend to details we didn't expect to encounter. Whole segments of what might be included in another person's map may be entirely missing from our own. Secondly, our internal maps facilitate daily decisions. So long as we perceive our maps to be an accurate representation of the world, we rely on the information and the configuration of information to eliminate the need to consider every choice anew every day. To the extent we experience no tension between what we believe about reality and our experience of reality, our internal maps are authoritative for us. Implicit in their structure are our values and our priorities. It is on the basis of those authoritative structures we evaluate constantly. Evaluation is a double process. It includes the external world in relationship to our internal value grid, but, more importantly, we evaluate as we





make choices to contribute to the external "substantiation" of the reality constructed inside of us.<sup>1</sup>

How do particular interpretations of reality gain ascendancy, that is, become an important component of the internal maps of a significant proportion of a population? A given interpretation benefits a sufficient number of individuals to claim their allegiance to that worldview and that segment of the population has sufficient influence to obtain the allegiance of enough others to retain a dominant position. For those who benefit directly from a particular structure of reality, allegiance is active. These individuals not only participate in "substantiating" the paradigm by creating institutions in society that mirror the shape of their paradigm, they are also active in recruiting others to do the same. Some recruiting is persuasive; other individuals who are potential beneficiaries of the paradigm can be shown how their voluntary participation in externalizing the paradigm is to their advantage. Some recruiting may be coercive. The less obvious but most effective way to ensure assent and participation in the paradigm is to make sure the

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Elaine Scarry's The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Her extraordinary analysis of the connection between the way in which the body participates in meaning making is stunning. Her focus is on the role of torture in destroying first the internal world of an individual and then the external world of the victim. However, she also illustrates how we "substantiate" reality by participating in external structures that conform to our strength, whether physical or moral, we participate in the creation of reality. We make manifest in the external world the values we deem important to our internal sense of order. Her analysis shows the dynamic relationship between our internal structure of meaning and our interaction with the external world.



paradigm is imprinted on the internal maps of individuals during their formative years. There are degrees of coerciveness involved. Where the paradigm is firmly in place, it will be absorbed as "the way things are." Where the paradigm is under question, more active education may be necessary for individuals to adopt the scheme of meaning for themselves. In situations where the paradigm is under siege, overt violation may be necessary to ensure its internalization.<sup>2</sup> Other modes of coercion may be employed to retain compliance with the paradigm--because we are physical beings that require material resources to survive, threats to our survival can be effective in persuading us to acquiesce to a worldview even if we are no longer persuaded it is either the only way or the best way of ordering the world.

### The Image of God

For each paradigm of reality, each structure of authority, there is an image of the highest good, the most important value of that worldview. It is an embodied, visual metaphor of the value structure of the paradigm. It is often taken for what

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<sup>2</sup>This is the most important function of child abuse, physical or sexual. At a time when an individual's worldview is undergoing development, it is necessary that the dominant social view be internalized so that the paradigm will be replicated and supported externally in the future. When the transfer of the paradigm has been successful, the vulnerable individual will have few resources to re-evaluate reality independently. The person's internal world has been imprinted before the reservoir of experience and strength to make an "informed choice" about allegiance. Subsequently, the individual will act on the values and structure of the paradigm, contributing passive assent to the reality imposed upon her/him. S/he will be an unwitting accomplice in "substantiating" a reality that s/he has had little opportunity to choose.



we mean by "God." What we worship, what we fear, what we hope in is the "best" we can imagine, given what we "know" about ourselves and the world we live in. In the Western world, the most prevalent descriptions of God include characteristics like omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, impassibility, perfection-- characteristics that encourage the belief that the highest good is a static, implacable, overwhelming entity that is a given which we must accept. If this image is internalized, the individual is encouraged to accept reality as a given, an entity that must be accepted without recourse. There are a second set of characteristics that are associated with Christian thought that are in some ways inconsistent with this first set -- God is personal, that is having attributes that we recognize as human, characteristics like compassion, forgiveness, mercy. Rarely do these two clusters of characteristics exist separately; as a consequence, theodicy is the most enduring and intractable theological problem for our culture. We as a culture are unable to resolve the competing paradigms of value: Power or Love. We will know when we, as a culture, have constructed a new configuration of value and meaning when a new image of God emerges and is accepted as representing our highest aspirations for ourselves and the world.





## CHAPTER X

*we know no rule  
of procedure,*

*we are voyagers, discoverers  
of the not-known,*

*the unrecorded;  
we have no map;*

*possibly we will reach haven,  
heaven.*

H.D.

## THE CRONING PIECE

During the years immediately preceding my decision to leave my marriage, I spent a lot of time "spinning my wheels." I asked the same questions again and again, made the same conclusions over and over, and felt a mounting frustration that I couldn't find a better answer. I knew I was using a lot of energy repeating strategies that I had already experienced as inadequate. But I kept hoping another look at a particular problem would reveal a previously overlooked detail or an untried possibility that would suggest a solution I hadn't considered before. I often felt discouraged and stuck.

Others could see potential solutions to nearly every question I discussed with them. Wisely, they refrained from giving advice or making direct recommendations. Perhaps they knew I would simply shift to arguing against whatever proposal they



offered. Perhaps they understood that the process was mine to work through, that I was responsible for deciding whether the familiar pain was what I wanted to cope with or whether I wanted to risk something new.

I was stuck in a puzzle that seemed to have no solution, a place so constructed that I could go around in circles forever, following paths I had followed before, always moving, but trapped in a bewildering, interminable process. Even though I knew that what held me captive was a construction, not an immutable given, I kept looking for a way out, searching for the exit that wasn't there. The maze I was in was a particular combination of internalized expectations and limits that, in their effect, kept me on a track that was not only going nowhere, but was discouraging because it was so repetitive. The self awareness I had was not enough to free me--I knew I was stuck in a trap that I had inadvertently helped construct, but I didn't know how to reverse the process. The design belonged to someone else; I had participated in its construction without informed consent. I knew that someone benefited from the structure, and it wasn't me. I knew I was circling the same issues again and again. I knew that there was not some magical force that would miraculously whisk me up and away from it all. I recognized if I was going to be free, I would have to choose to do something different.

What I was experiencing was an oppression of a particular kind. It is the oppression that is diffuse and faceless. No one person is/was responsible for the bewilderment or suffering. It is impersonal in that "I" had little to do with being held in its clutches. It was seductive in that there are/were just enough benefits





associated with accepting the situation as inevitable ( and perhaps therefore "right") to reinforce the confusion I was feeling.<sup>1</sup>

Distribution of rewards is one aspect of the oppression of patriarchy that undergirds and maintains the power relationships of the status quo. Those of us who benefit, if only capriciously and inadequately, have a difficult time fully comprehending the destructiveness of the maze we are caught in. Our anxiety about losing the little we have keeps us focused on trying to wrest some small control within the rules of the system.

As I approached the task of completing this D. Min. project, I spent considerable time searching for a way to begin writing. "Writer's block" is the conventional way to describe the immobilization I experienced. The stuckness I felt was not like a single boulder standing in the way of progress; I used a lot of energy considering and re-considering dozens of ways to organize the material I wanted to include. No matter which solution I settled on, there seemed to be a number of good and sufficient reasons not to proceed with it. I went over the same ground, again and again, seeking the overlooked detail that would provide the key to

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<sup>1</sup>There is a classic experiment that studied the effects of different schedules of reward on pigeons. Three groups of pigeons were observed in different circumstances. The first group was consistently rewarded with a kernel of corn every time they pecked a lever. After an initial flurry of activity, the group settled down to a routine of pecking when they were hungry. The second group of pigeons received no reward for their activity. After an initial period of exploration and investigation, these pigeons settled into apathy and inactivity. The third group of pigeons was rewarded randomly. The activity level of these pigeons never abated; they were restless and anxious, finally exhibiting behavior that in humans would be characterized as neurotic.



interpretation that would unlock the puzzle. I did everything I knew to hasten the process. I read and re-read dozens of resources. I consulted anyone who had patience to listen to me. I knew that I would finally have to make a decision, a decision that would preclude every possibility but one concerning the form and content of the project. I was stymied by the prospect of having to make an assertion about my self through the choices I had to make about the project.

I worried. I waited. In retrospect I know that my preparation and research were important, but at the time those activities were mostly a way to relieve my frustration. I know the material one accumulates enters the reservoir of the unconscious to be added to that great source and resource of all creativity to be reshaped for eventual use. But as I waited for inspiration, I was not at all certain what the outcome would be. There is no substitute for incubation, for waiting, but my anxiety mounted by the day.

It was appropriate that at the close of the ecclesiastical calendar, on the eve of Advent when the Christian church formally designates a time of expectation, of anticipation of something new, I was visited by an image pregnant with possibilities for the task before me. It came almost eight years to the day after a similar experience, the time when I was inspired to express what I was feeling in poetry. The new inspiration felt like an appropriate close to a long march. It was then that I understood how the process of writing the project was a replication, in a somewhat smaller version, of the process I had experienced as I worked my way through the decision to leave my marriage. The two experiences shared the anxiety-



laden task of giving definition to myself through making a choice that was fraught with many possibilities of interpretation. The feelings of frustration with the apparent options I had and the feelings of anxiety about the risks I perceived were all too familiar.

As in the previous experience, the emergence of images "occurred" to me in a moment of reverie; there were no apparent antecedents to their eruption. Like the imagery of the poem that helped me "see" how I felt about my past and what I knew about my future, the new images interpreted my feelings about the project and offered a solution to the problem of conceptualizing the material. The images were a message from the "I" that had something important to say and wanted to bring her emergence to light. It was time to bring an era to completion.

This recent experience began, I believe, during vacation this summer when I bought a pair of earrings. I was drawn to an intricate design entitled "Eagle's Knot" engraved on brass disks; the effect was very striking. The jewelers who fabricated the earrings called themselves The Alchemists; they were dedicated to "raising one's consciousness from the mundane to the spiritual, i.e., from lead to gold." The material that accompanied the earrings spoke of the power of the symbolic and the need to understand the symbols one chose to wear. Not only did it imply that the wearer would be affected by the symbol, it suggested that the purchaser be able to render an account of the symbol to anyone who asked.

In the brief description of the origin of the design, they said the Eagle's Knot is believed to be philologic in origin. Its pattern was memorized by storytellers to





remind them of the religious traditions, the stories and the history of the Celts. The design also served as a mandala, "focusing the conscious mind as it follows the sinuous path of the knot, while the subconscious/conscious mind understands the deeper meaning (of the eternal connectedness of all things)."

The logo of The Alchemists was a circular design depicting a figure standing at the entrance of a complicated maze.

Finding the earrings and wearing them coincides with the time I have been conscious of searching for the "thread" that would provide an entree into the tangle of ideas I have been considering for this project.

From my journal of this fall: "From the time I first put them on, I have been threading my way through the labyrinth, searching for the center. I have suffered through many false starts. I have traveled down blind alleys and encountered a variety of cul-de-sacs. I have discovered the same place several times. No amount of attention to detail or resolve to remember the twists and turns of the track have kept me from traveling in circles. I have become confused, baffled."

Mary Daly would say, "mazed," stuck in the confining circuits of expectation constructed by a patriarchal society. I needed to become a-mazed. In Gyn-ecology, she has this to say about the process of personal liberation:

Within a culture possessed by the myth of feminine evil, the naming, describing, theorizing about good and evil has constituted a maze/haze of deception. The journey of women becoming is breaking through this maze--springing into free space, which is an a-mazing process.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) p. 2.



She continues:

Breaking through the Male Maze is both exorcism and ecstasy. It is spinning through and beyond the father's foreground which is the arena of games. This spinning involves encountering the demons who block the various thresholds as we move through gateway after gateway into the deepest chambers of our homeland, which is the Background of our Selves.. . Objectification and alienation take place when we are locked into the male-centered, monodimensional foreground.<sup>3</sup>

It was by "accident" that I leafed through Mary Daly's book at the appropriate time. I hadn't picked it up since October, 1987 when I finished reading it. According to the date I recorded on the front page, I completed the book just six weeks after I moved away from my former life and entered a new one. I cannot remember if the ideas expressed in the book were part of my consciousness as I wrote my proposal for study at EDS. They certainly spoke to me this fall.

The logo of *The Alchemists* was the image I needed to help me "see" where I was (cf. Appendix B). The stick figure, standing at the entrance to the maze did not realize that there was no way to gain the center. The maze was constructed in such a way that no path led to the center, to the solution of the puzzle. I could borrow Ariadne's thread to explore the many circular paths, but at the end of the exploration, I would still be stuck and unsuccessful. The maze was designed to baffle my attempts to get to the heart of the matter.

So I was not mistaken about the "thread." Finding Ariadne's thread would have allowed me to proceed or retreat safely. It would have assured me that I

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 2-3.





could exit from the confusion of the maze the same way I entered. However obvious that solution might be, it didn't seem to be what was required. I felt I needed to be free of the maze altogether, not just confident of safe passage in the midst of it.

Finally, it was reflection on yet another portion from Mary Daly that sealed my conviction that I had at last found my way through.

Hags hearing into the labyrinth beyond the foreground hear new voices--our own voices. . . Hearing/moving through this intricate terrain we find our way from the entrance of the labyrinth deeper into the center of the homeland, of the Self.. . As she cuts down the baffles/demons with her labrys she moves deeper into the labyrinth leading to the moving center, the Eye of the cosmic cyclone, the "I" who says, I am. . . Only those who know the secrets of knotting can unknot, and unknotting can be seen as making our way through the labyrinth. Circlot points out: "To undo the knot is equivalent to finding the Center.

Now I had the key to the labyrinth. I was no longer a "lost soul." I was still in the middle of the thicket, in the middle of the wilderness, but with the knowledge I needed to proceed.<sup>4</sup>

So much depends on accurate naming. With this insight, I was still challenged to describe and communicate what I had identified as a significant

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<sup>4</sup>From the Encyclopedia Britannica: "A labyrinth or maze means an intricate network of pathways enclosed by hedges. . . so that those who enter become bewildered in their efforts to find the center or make their exit. . . it is found that egress is as difficult is ingress. To every design of this sort there should be a key, but even those who know the key are apt to be perplexed." The article continues: "Some of the older designs for labyrinths, however, avoid this close parallelism of the alleys, which, though equally involved and intricate in their windings are carried through blocks of thick planting. These blocks of shrubbery have been called wildernesses."



experience, an experience that seems to have parallels in the lives of other women, but I had received the gift of the key. I could escape the maze and attend to the experience of the labyrinth. Mary Daly explains:

Concomitant with the a-mazing struggle. . . is the ecstatic process of Spinsters dis-covering the labyrinth of our own unfolding/becoming. Passing through the male-made mazes is not a preliminary lap of the journey. It makes way for and accompanies the Ecstatic Labyrinthine Journey of Survivors.<sup>5</sup>

During the same vacation period, the title of the project also presented itself to me. At the time, it had no apparent connection to the other process that was gestating. As I followed the trail the new title opened up (described in a previous chapter) the connections became more apparent.

As I related earlier, I was untroubled by the substitution of "soul" for "spirit" in my title. Like most of us, I failed to make any distinction between them. Hillman's insights helped me define the phenomenon I had been studying more accurately. His insights also helped me identify the maze I had been caught in with regard to completing this project. Until I re-named the project, the former subtitle was partly correct in suggesting what I was trying to do. I was struggling to abstract and generalize an experience of mine (and others), trying to transform it into a spiritual experience, not recognizing that what I was studying had more to do with soul than spirit. I was trying to push information into a mold that was unsuitable for the material. I was caught in the "mind over matter" dichotomy that is so characteristic of patriarchal ideology. What I thought I needed to do was take this

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<sup>5</sup>Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology, p. 32.



"stuff" and clean it up, rub off the rough edges, line it all up in neat categories and presto!, a legitimate piece of research. That the material resisted all the way was apparent. Why it did, wasn't. I was caught in the maze of abstraction, trying to find my way to the center when it was impossible to get there from the place I had started. The requirements of the abstracting process were baffling me.

It was at that point in my search for a way to frame the final document of the project that I concluded in order to be faithful to my process and to the experience of the women I had interviewed, I would have to abandon any effort to turn the work into an academic tour de force. I had come too far to stifle the new voice that was emerging for me. The images invited me and encouraged me to risk giving up what was familiar and known in the interests of finding something new. They were my key to unlocking the maze. I could stay in the mode of the past, suppressing (violating) what I now "knew," but traveling down familiar paths, or I could push on to the new place, trusting my instincts and abilities to cope with what I would find there.

I re-ordered my priorities. Even more important than completing the project was my commitment to speak in my own voice.

I have used the terms orientation, disorientation and reorientation to describe the psychic spaces involved in the process of emergence-y. This scheme is one way to designate what has often been observed in the lives of women coming





to know themselves in a particular set of circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Orientation represents the time when a particular structure of meaning provided a way to understand the world adequately. In this study, it represents the ideology of patriarchy that provides the deep structure of family and church, the institutions that the women of this study accepted as a way to give definition to them selves. Orientation is still the dominant ideology in our culture, although there are more and more individuals and groups challenging various aspects of its operation. There is no escaping its effects entirely; awareness of its power and its pervasiveness is only a partial defense against it. But awareness of the oppression of orientation means an individual enters the psychic space of disorientation.

Disorientation begins when discrepancies register in an individual psyche, whether from the pain of obvious abuse or the confusion and bewilderment that ensues when experience doesn't match expectations. Most of us live most of the time in this place. We are delayed in recognizing the source of the disorientation and taking action to change it because we are encouraged to believe we are deficient in our perceptions and our judgments. Even when we gain some insight

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<sup>6</sup>As samples of other ways to describe women's process toward consciousness, see Shelia Collins in A Different Heaven and Earth (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974) who discusses the unique features of consciousness-raising, comparing it to "awakening" and "conversion" (pp. 200-206); and Dorothy Soelle who in Suffering (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) outlines the process of transformation from silence to advocacy as a way to describe women's transformation from powerlessness to power (p. 73).



as to the true source of our discomfort, sometimes all we can do is resist.<sup>7</sup>

Reorientation is gaining a clarity of vision that accurately locates the source of pain and oppression. It is being able to live in a new reality at the same time not forgetting how powerful the old still is. It is knowing that anything that will make new life possible depends on you and others like you to create it together. It is choosing to leave behind the authority of the old orientation, and accepting that the decisions about what is best for you and for the world are yours to make.

The images that broke open the endless circles of frustration for me were the maze and labyrinth and later, the web of connection. As I reflected on my experience and rejoiced in Mary Daly's insights, I distinguished the maze and the labyrinth, somewhat arbitrarily. Part of what I observed in my self and in the women of this study, was a search for the core of oneself. The drive for integrity is prominent in the stories. The diagram of the maze that was included with the earrings (cf. Appendix B) shows that it is impossible for anyone to reach the center. It is that element of ultimate frustration that the maze represents, the utter impossibility for a woman to be successful in solving the puzzle.

The labyrinth, on the other hand, I use to correspond to the category of disorientation, representing the necessity of working through whatever conditions we find ourselves in, but armed with some information that lets us know where the

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<sup>7</sup>Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker movement summed up the recognition of the immensity of the task when he said, "When I began, I hoped to change the world. By the end, I hoped to keep the world from changing me."





places of weakness are in the design, in the walls, in the intersections of paths. While we are still required to cope with a situation not entirely of our making, there are possibilities for something new to happen, to emerge. The center is not absolutely blocked. Recognizing oneself in the labyrinth is to be a-mazed; not entirely free of all that would bind us, but not totally enthralled either.

Another image that emerged for me over the summer that I thought had nothing to do with the D. Min. project was an idea that occurred to me as a novel way to celebrate my 50th birthday. Among the many objects that I had noticed on vacation, there was one that presented itself over and over. It is "the" current piece of Native American culture that is being distributed widely. Everywhere I went I saw dreamcatchers--in the form that resembles their original design, made from twisted grape vines supporting circular nets of string or rawhide; in miniature, made from silver for earrings; engraved on wooden plaques to hang on the wall. They are an artifact of the Ojibway tribe, meant to hang over children as they sleep in order to ward off bad dreams and snare good ones. As I was considering how to celebrate a birthday of some significance with a community of friends and family scattered across the nation, I tried to think of a way to bring them all together. In an inspired moment, I decided to use my skills as a quilter to create a wall hanging that would include pieces of cloth from any of my friends who wanted to contribute. The design, of course, would be "Dreamcatcher."

The similarity to a web was not lost on me. I appreciated the connection since I associate the web with creation and agency. As I worked with the images



of maze and labyrinth, the categories of orientation, disorientation and reorientation, I made the last connection that brought everything to full circle. Creativity is a mark of being free of oppressive limits. Taking an opportunity, as the spider does, to use appropriate materials found in the environment to anchor a new structure and to weave the connections is exercising the kind of agency I associate with reorientation. It is an image, in this case, that represents "a new thing" and confirms "a new thing."

This project bears witness to the "new thing" that has emerged in my life and in the lives of the women who shared their stories with me. It testifies to the power that works quietly, almost imperceptively but nevertheless steadily, through a variety of circumstances and opportunities to release life from the constraints that stunt its full development. It stands as a memorial to the mystery that moves us in ways we do not set out to go. It attests to the strength of the soul's emergence, emergence that precedes and succeeds emergence-y, ensuring that life is work in progress.



## QUILTS

*Frugality is not the point. Nor waste.  
It's just that very little is discarded  
in any honest spending of the self,  
and what remains is used and used  
again, worn thin by use, softened  
to the pliancy and the translucence  
of old linen, patched, mended, reinforced,  
and saved. So I discover how  
I am rejoicing slowly into a woman  
who grows older daring to write  
the same poem over and over, not merely  
rearranged, revised, reworded, but one poem  
hundreds of times anew.*

*Throwing a piece away is not the answer. Nor  
has hoarding anything to do with this.  
And anybody really hazards piecework in the expectation  
that some day all these fragments might inevitably fit  
into a gentle billow of warmth, to comfort  
the longest winter sleep.  
Not even that;  
it's just the pleasure of rescuing some particle  
of meaning. For a while.*

*Of course, this means that you yourself  
are placed where you risk being  
all the more severely worn  
into translucency  
held up toward the light.*

Robin Morgan



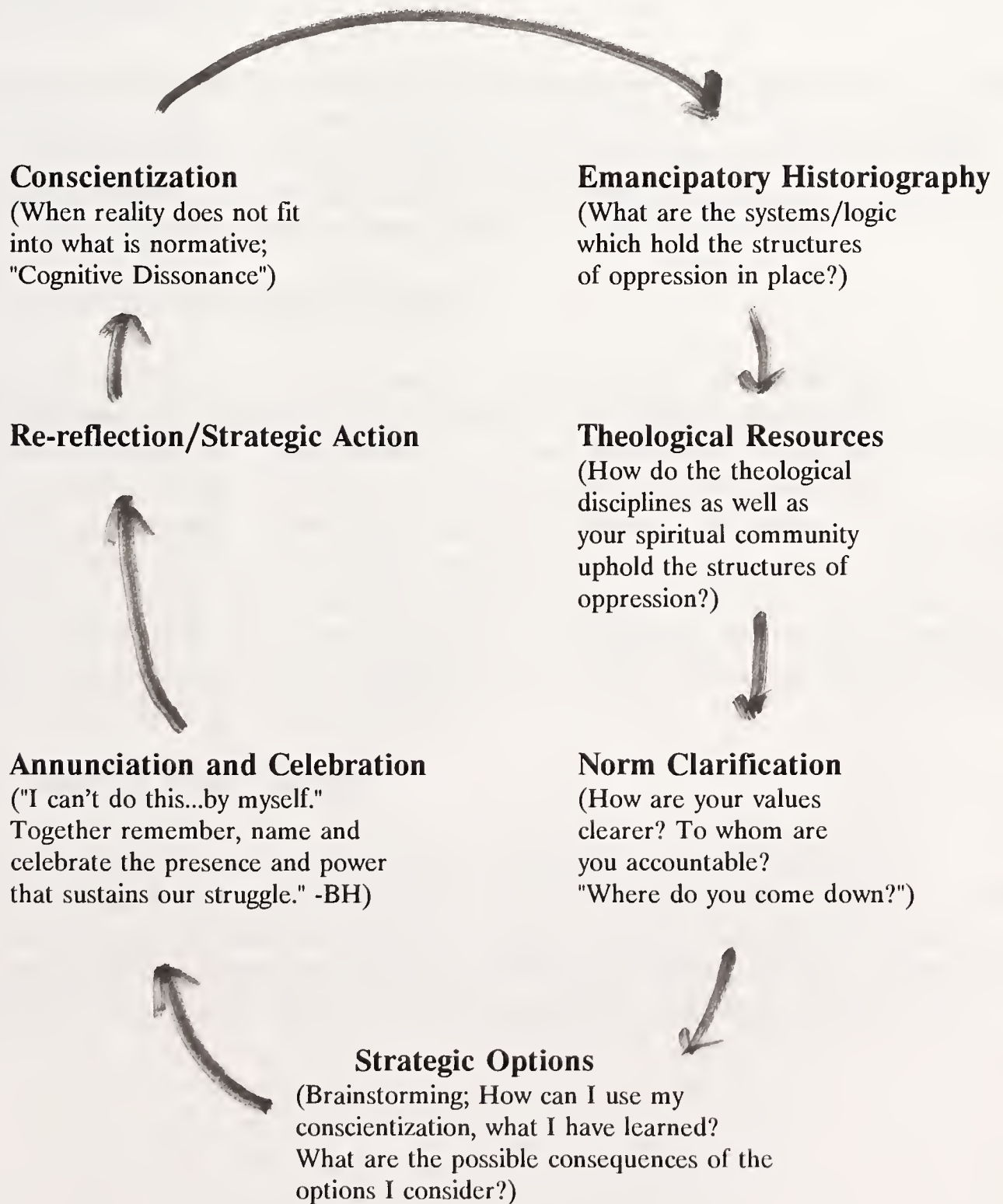


## APPENDIX A

### THE DANCE OF REDEMPTION

By Dr. Katie Cannon

(adapted from "Theological Reflection in the Struggle for Liberation" by Beverly Harrison)



# Diagram

Diagram illustrating the process of photosynthesis.

The diagram shows a cycle of energy and matter flow between the atmosphere, land, and water.



Atmosphere

Water



Land

Land



Water

Water



Diagram illustrating the process of photosynthesis.

## **DANCE OF REDEMPTION:**

Excerpts from Beverly Harrison's "Theological Reflection in the Struggle for Liberation" from Making the Connections.

## **CONSCIANTIZATION:**

"...involves recognition that what we have experienced, in isolation and silence, as private pain is in fact a public, structural dynamic.... Together we slowly re-vision our reality so that what appeared, originally, to be an individual or personalized "problem" or even a human "failing" is exposed as a basic systemic pattern of injustice."

"Until each participant in the process of reflection has been empowered to break silence and name her or his own story, the pedagogy of liberation is violated. As Sheila Rowbotham has observed, silence among the oppressed always signifies the absence of hope. If the oppressed are silent while theologians or other intellectuals speak, no empowerment occurs."

## **EMANCIPATORY HISTORIOGRAPHY:**

"There must also be an effort to clarify how the structural interaction among varying dynamics of oppression have differently affected the lives and perceptions of our own group and others. For example, how do the burdens of men and women within our group vary, and what has conditioned these differences in the past? How do the historical dynamics of sexism, racism, and classism prevent solidarity from developing within our community? ...the critical interpretations of the most marginated must be accepted as 'correcting' the subjective blind spots in our own experience. 'Objectivity here means openness to others' history and to the critical claims that history bears and also the ability to learn from other' historical experience."

## **THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES:**

"We cannot complete our work without scrutinizing our appropriation of scripture/tradition.... To subject ourselves and our churches to critique is to keep faith with them by challenging them to return to the path of liberating praxis. Theological fidelity...means candidly and judiciously facing our own community's complicity in those roots and structures of oppression our social analysis lays bare."





## **NORM CLARIFICATION:**

"The test of the seriousness of our commitment is whether we welcome having those who were previously silent wrest our theory from us, altering and transforming it through their unique appropriation.... Genuine solidarity involves not mere subjective identification with oppressed people but concrete answerability to them. Solidarity is accountability, and accountability means being vulnerable, capable of being changed by the oppressed, welcoming their capacity to critique and alter our reality."

## **STRATEGIC OPTIONS:**

"Movements for social change have long recognized the importance of calculating the consequences of alternative strategies of action, but liberation ethics must recognize the importance of both the realistic and the utopian/imaginative functions of consequentialist thinking....Realism always must be constrained not by abstract idealism but by continuing, long-term loyalty and accountability to those whom change is intended to serve. The absence of genuine accountability ensures that realism will degenerate into the crassest type of political pragmatism, which always functions to protect established privilege. An absence of realism, though, threatens a movement for change, because naivete and lack of hard assessment of possible consequences of strategic options inevitably rebounds to the disadvantage of those already weak and dispossessed.

## **ANNUNCIATION AND CELEBRATION:**

"The reconstructive phase of liberation theology is possible only when the critique of society and tradition has been addressed self-consciously....What we creatively reappropriate and re-present as liberating or God-bearing in our past tradition needs to be rehearsed and annunciated to keep hope alive."

"Annunciation feeds hope, but so does celebration. Wherever there is genuine resistance to evil and solidarity in struggle, there is also the human experience of deep joy or deep pain. Not to know either is to lack the resources for celebration. To be tied to the present order is to be filled with anxiety that we may lose what we already have: power, wealth, prestige, control, or even vicarious identification with those things. By contrast, where people really engage deeply and humanly on behalf of their own and their sisters' and brothers needs, rituals of shared empowerment emerge that authentically express and support the longing for justice that is nurtured or reborn in us, together."





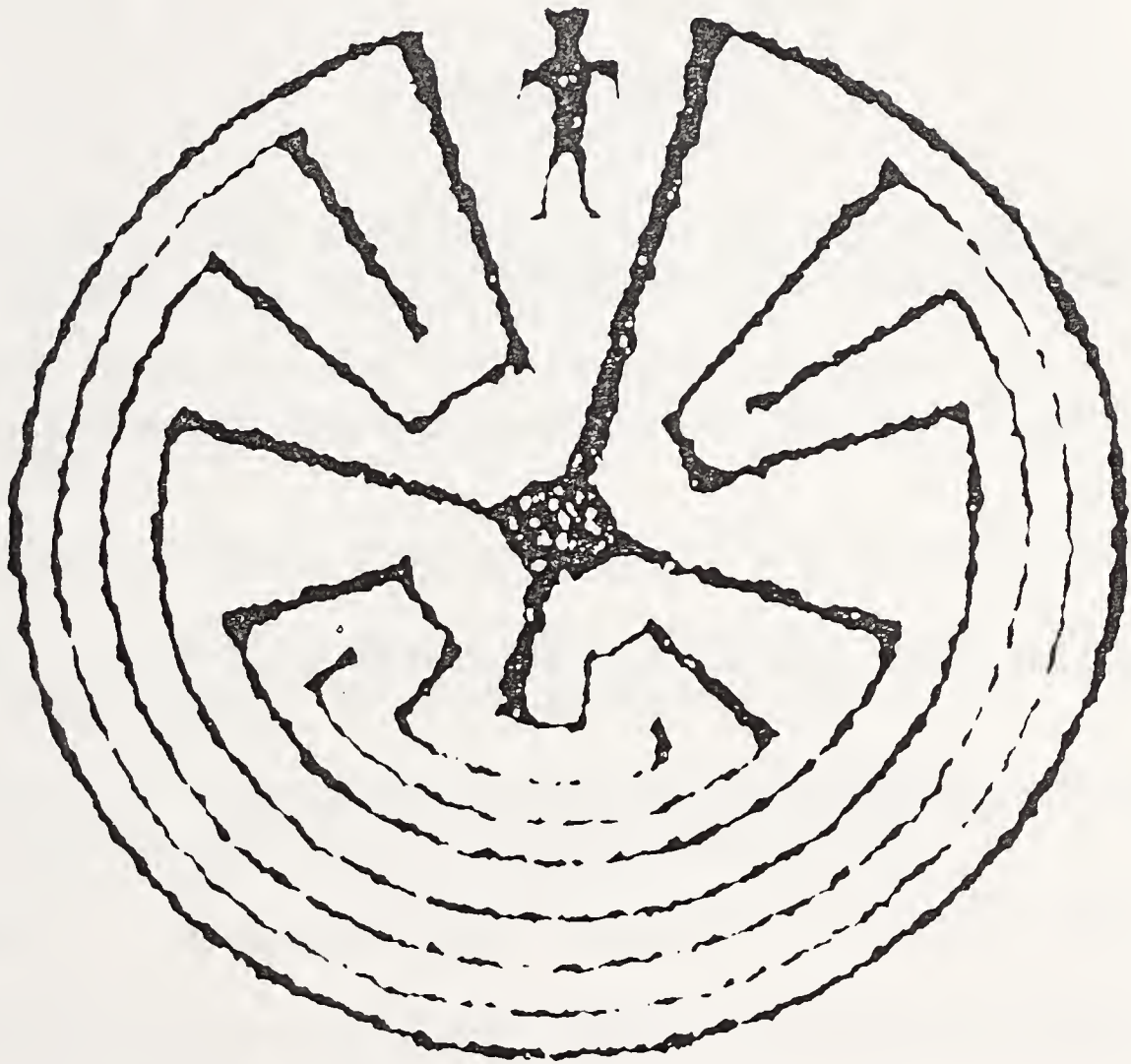


Diagram 1. Example of maze with an inaccessible center.



Diagram 2. Example of labyrinth with access to the center.





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TO: Don Winslow, Director of the D. Min. Program  
FROM: Demaris Wehr  
RE: Lois Happe  
DATE: May 3, 1993

On Tuesday, April 13, 1993, Lois Happe met with two members of her thesis committee and three friends to discuss her D. Min. thesis. Present were: Dr. Alison Cheek, Dr. Brita Gill-Ostern (Andover-Newton), Marjorie Mollar, Myriel Eykamp, Anne Jackson and Eileen Maoney. I, Demaris Wehr, director of the thesis, was unable to be present. Because of my absence, I cannot give you as full a report of the process as I would do otherwise.

Lois began by presenting a wall hanging she had made using the pattern of "dreamcatcher." This wall hanging was both part of her project and her presentation. From all reports, it was a wonderful tapestry to add to the already impressive piece of work Lois had done on the thesis.

Lois' thesis is entitled "Souls in a State of Emergence-y: Work in Progress." Its subject is the painful decision-making process many women go through in mid-life as they find that earlier decisions, made in their youth, no longer serve the purpose of their identity. Lois explored this issue with two small samples of women: former nuns who had left the convent, and former wives who had left a marriage. She found much in common between the two groups, including theological issues. Although the nuns had given more specific thought to the theological issues, theological questions and reassessments were prevalent in the minds of the women leaving marriages as well. Lois also explored spiritual dimensions, as well as theological questions, of this kind of crisis in women's lives. One finding stands out (both a spiritual and a theological finding): many of the women had to reconstruct their image of God to get out--out of both the marriage and the convent. It was a journey from a patriarchal, punitive God to an empowering one.

Lois drew on her own experience as a woman who had chosen to leave a marriage at mid-life. In the process of writing the thesis, Lois discovered her own subjective voice. This new "voice" informed the thesis throughout, and made it lively and engaging.

Everyone present at the thesis defense enthusiastically supported Lois' work. Although not present, I also find this thesis interesting and important. It has been a pleasure to watch Lois find her "voice", claim her experience, and use it in the service of finding an investigative methodology that eventually could illumine the experience of others: all this around an important and timely topic.

Lois Happe has successfully completed the requirements of the Doctor of Ministry degree at Episcopal Divinity School.

cc: Fredrica Harris Thompsett, Academic Dean  
Jean Osborn, Registrar  
Alison Cheek, Director of the FLT Program  
Lois Happe









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